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THE HORNS OF THAT LIVING CRESCENT SEEMED TO BEND AROUND HIM, AS IF TO EMBRACE HIM IN THEIR DEADLY TRAMPLING.

OR,
The Outlaws of the Abilene
Cattle Trail.

BY LEON LEWIS,
AUTHOR OF "THE FLYING GLIM," ETC.

CHAPTER I.
THE AMBUSCADE.

A HORSEMAN was galloping across one of the great plains of Indian Territory, in the midst of the Reservation of the Cheyennes and Arapahoes.

He was tall and powerfully-built, weighing not less than two hundred pounds, and possessed as much agility as strength.

His skin was deeply sunburnt, and his long black hair, which fell about his face to his shoulders, in the style of a red-skin, added to the sinister character of the aspect he presented.

All the worst passions of human nature—such as greed, selfishness, and cruelty—had been stamped in unmistakable lines upon his features.

His gaze was as keen as restless.
He carried a revolver and a large hunting

knife in a belt at his waist, and had a breech-loading rifle slung across his shoulders.

He had come from Fort Reno, going toward the Cimarron, and was about midway between that river and the Canadian, or twenty miles from each.

To judge by the condition of his horse, which was panting and foam-flecked, he had ridden rapidly a long distance.

A few miles east of him, just within the western border of the Oklahoma Country, lay the Abilene Cattle Trail, which is also a stage route between Kansas and Texas, and the most important of those crossing the Territory from north to south, as is shown by the fact that the U. S. Government sends the mail over its whole length six days in the week.

Ere long this man reached a somewhat marked depression, where a wooded ravine crossed the trail laterally, and here he came to a halt, leaping lightly to the ground.

Hardly a zephyr was stirring, so that not even a rustling of leaves disturbed the silence.

The eyes of the strange man lighted up as contentedly as wickedly, as he bent a keen glance around him.

"Pretty well done, Weezy," he ejaculated. "No one would suspect your presence!"

At this remark there was a stir in the bushes beside the trail, and "Weezy" made his appearance.

The name was evidently a familiar or affectionate diminutive for *Weasel*!

It certainly corresponded to the aspect of the man who bore it.

Weezy was tall and slender, and as active of foot as a spider, although his wrinkled, strongly-lined features attested that he was far along in the second half-century of his existence.

He was as wicked and enterprising, too, not to say as sly and dangerous as the animal to which he had been likened.

"I was quite right, Weezy," said the horseman, drawing his bridle over his arm. "I have further advices from Caldwell, both by letter and telegraph, and it's true that Sam Hooper will be here by the very next stage."

"Glad o' that, sir," said Weezy.

The tone and mien with which these words were exchanged attested the nature of the relations between the two men.

They were not merely master and man, but had been closely associated for years in unnumbered crimes.

The Caldwell mentioned is a town of two hundred inhabitants in Southern Kansas, close to the line of Indian Territory.

A branch of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway ends at Caldwell, and here the stages of the Abilene Cattle Trail take their start.

"You're perfectly certain, colonel?" added Weezy.

"Perfectly. My correspondent saw him taking passage at Caldwell, and has telegraphed me accordingly."

"In cipher, as usual?"

"Of course, and also in an assumed name, as we cannot be too careful, considering the use we propose to make of this information."

"Then I am here, Colonel Vann, just in time for the business in hand?" pursued Weezy, as he glanced at a splendid gold watch he carried.

"Just in time, Weezy," returned the colonel. "Sam Hooper will be here in less than an hour. You have six of the boys here with you?"

"Precisely as you ordered, colonel, when you set out this morning for Fort Reno and Darlington."

"You've placed three each side of the trail?" Weezy assented.

"So as to pour in a cross-fire the moment Sam Hooper passes yonder crest and begins descending into the ravine?"

"Exactly."

The eyes of Colonel Vann lighted up with a glow of savage malignity.

"We have him!" he growled, grinding the words with teeth and lips to such an extent that they were scarcely audible. "He will of course leave the stage at Kingfisher Creek Station, where his men have already left a horse for his use, as I have casually learned from Newert, the hostler in charge of the station. He will of course take this trail to reach the spot where his cattle are feeding. He will even take this trail if his cowboy-in-chief and representative, Comanche Jim, should go to the Kingfisher Creek Stage Station to meet him. It will be a pity if said Jim fails to show his boss this little attention."

"It will indeed!" declared Weezy, with a smile which laid bare his toothless gums. "We can kill both as easy as we can kill one if they'll only give us the chance! Hark!"

The two men listened.

A clatter of hoofs had begun to resound in a direction nearly opposite to that from which Colonel Vann had come, and this clatter grew louder and louder every moment.

"I fancy that is Comanche Jim, colonel," said Weezy hurriedly, "and would risk my pile that he's on his way to Kingfisher Creek Station to meet his employer!"

"In that case, we may as well make sure of

him now!" suggested Colonel Vann, reaching briskly for his rifle.

"No, colonel," cried Weezy. "As he goes this way to the station, he's sure to return this way, bringing his boss with him, and we can kill them both together!"

"True, Weezy! That's the best course to take. We'll hide in the bushes, and let him pass!"

The two men had barely concealed themselves beside the trail when a fine-looking young fellow, in the holiday garb of a cowboy, galloped through the depression and vanished over the creek to which the colonel had alluded.

"Comanche Jim, sure enough!" muttered Vann, as he emerged from his concealment and looked in the direction the cowboy had gone. "What gay plumage! Ten to one the fellow has gone to meet Sam Hooper, as you suggested. I am delighted to have seen him. His movements declare as plainly as words could, that all the advices I have received of late are as straight as a string, and that we shall be rid of Sam Hooper in less than an hour!"

"He little suspects what sort of reception awaits him here, I reckon," chuckled Weezy.

"Or just *who* is awaiting him!" and a horrible leer distorted the colonel's countenance. "True, he may suspect who has stampeded his cattle. He *must* know, if he knows anything, that I am the arch enemy who has made him so much trouble and cost him so much money. Oh, how I hate him!"

The looks of the colonel confirmed his words. His features were convulsed, and his eyes glowed like fire.

"And his father, too, I suppose?" ventured Weezy.

"Yes, and his mother! I hate 'em all!"

"Even the girl, colonel?"

"Yes, even the girl! I hate her even more now than I ever loved her!"

Weezy bowed understandingly, and with an air which suggested that he had been called upon in the course of his long career to entertain sentiments very similar to those which now agitated his master.

"And I'll be revenged upon *her*, too," added the colonel, as a vivid flush appeared upon his cheeks. "I hate her because she rejected my offer of marriage. I hate the old man because he discharged me from his employ so unceremoniously, and expressed the hope that he should never again set eyes upon me. I hate Sam Hooper because he said he'd shoot me at sight if I ever intruded again upon the girl, or even ventured to speak to her. Of course I could do no less than leave Wichita, where they all live, and so I came to the Nation."

By "the Nation" the colonel meant Indian Territory.

That is the way in which Indian Territory is always spoken of by the citizens of Kansas, Texas, and other adjacent States.

"I came here to hide," added Vann.

Weezy nodded again, as one who could sympathize personally with such a motive.

"I knew that *here* would be a good place to work out my revenge," pursued the colonel, "and I have not been mistaken. In less than eighteen months I have taken from the Hoopers—father and son, curse them!—more than seven thousand head of cattle!"

Again Weezy chuckled.

"And at last Sam Hooper's patience is exhausted. He's coming here to find out—if he can—what has become of his missing cattle. Of course he'll have a warm reception, Weezy."

"Of course, colonel!"

"And once he is out of the way, I'll send a letter or telegram in his name to the girl, that will fetch her here, and we'll soon make her wish she had never been born."

"The very thing, sir," approved Weezy. "I do not see as any one can prevent you from getting square with the whole tribe."

"No, Weezy," declared Vann. "You take care of Comanche Jim and Sam Hooper to-day, and I'll take care of the rest later."

"Oh, I shall run 'em under, sir," assured Weezy, complacently, with another smile. "Hark."

The couple listened again.

"Hear that, colonel?" added Weezy.

"Yes. What is it?"

"The boys are digging a hole to bury Sam Hooper in—one that will be large enough to also furnish room for Comanche Jim. I thought that would be better than to leave the body to be found."

"Quite right, Weezy," said Vann. "I had forgotten to mention that point."

"We're too near Fort Reno, you know," added Weezy, "to be in any way careless. The soldiers roam about a great deal when off duty, and I saw a party of them yesterday several miles this side of Raven's Spring, with Sergeant Crossman at their head."

"You did?" and Vann moved uneasily. "Think their ride this way had any connection with us?"

"No, sir. They were simply taking a stroll."

"In any case, we shall soon have a care less on our minds," said Vann, as he leaped into the saddle with easy grace. "I believe I've said all

there is to say in this matter. You understand just what to do and how to do it?"

"Depend upon it, sir."

"But don't make a botch of it, Weezy."

"Have no fear of that, colonel! We're as certain to kill Sam Hooper as we are to see him!"

The colonel smiled his approval.

"Of course I'm going straight to headquarters," he said, "and will look for you there as soon as the bodies of Sam Hooper and Comanche Jim have been duly lodged in that hole. Good luck, old fellow!"

And with this Colonel Vann galloped away briskly, his dark face glowing with infernal joy at the murderous ambush he left established behind him.

CHAPTER II.

ANOTHER TRAP SET.

At the same hour when the preceding events were occurring, a lame and rickety horse drawing a lumber-box wagon, in which three men were seated, could have been seen upon the Abilene Cattle Trail, about a mile south of the Cimarron River.

There was little in the appearance of these men to attract attention, save that they were a "hard-looking lot," poorly attired, and somewhat the worse for liquor.

Each carried a rifle and revolver.

The driver was considerably past the prime of life, and about the last man in the world to strike terror to the heart of an enemy, he being in poor health, and as feeble and shaky as a newly-born calf.

His name was Thad Burrows, but he was usually known as "the doctor," he having a smattering of knowledge concerning the ailments of cattle.

The man beside Burrows, on the spring-board which served as a seat, was known as a "drunken coot," and his reputation did not belie him. A heavy reward might have been offered in vain for even a shadow of evidence that Theopolus Drawback—for such was his name—had ever been known to do an honest day's work.

The third and last member of the trio, who sat in the hind end of the wagon, with his legs swinging over the end-board, and with the air of meditating upon death and slaughter, while he grimly clutched the rifle across his knees, bore the name of Rawdige, which had doubtless been abbreviated by generations of constitutional laziness from Rogers.

"Every man to his taste, boys," Thad Burrows was saying, as he plied an elastic shoot of hickory upon the roof of the anatomical museum presented by his horse, "but henceforth I'm going to take what the world owes me wherever I can find it!"

"That's the only course for us to take, doctor," declared Rawdige. "We've been fools too long."

"Yes, work and want are played out," affirmed Drawback. "It's time to realize that we're entitled to pick up all we can carry. But tell us more about this Sam Hooper."

"I was coming to that, boys," said Burrows. "These Hoopers are the great cattle-dealers who have their headquarters in Wichita, Kansas. From time to time Sam Hooper goes to Texas and buys several thousand head of cattle and starts 'em north across Injun Territory, feeding as they go, and moving four or five miles a day, so that they eventually fetch up in Kansas, a third or a half heavier than when they started, and as fat as butter, all ready to be put upon the cars and shipped to St. Louis and other great beef centers. In this way Sam Hooper and his father make thousands and tens of thousands of dollars every season."

"Which comes chiefly out o' Uncle Sam, who furnishes the grass for the cattle," said Rawdige.

"Or out o' these half-baked Injuns, who lease their prairies for a mere suck of tanglefoot," growled Drawback, with the air of being personally aggrieved. "But come to the pint, doctor. Tell us how we're to get our share of Sam Hooper's pile."

"The tale's soon told," assured the driver. "Sam Hooper is a passenger on the stage that will overtake us in less than an hour! He's again on his way to Texas to buy cattle, and must have an awful lot o' money with him—not less than forty or fifty thousand dollars!"

The hearers started excitedly, while their faces flushed with greed.

"So much?" cried Drawback.

"What a fortune!" exclaimed Rawdige. "But how do you know Sam Hooper's on the incoming stage?"

"I've had a line by telegraph from my brother who lives in Caldwell," explained Burrows. "We've been on the watch for months for Sam Hooper to come this way again. But here we are—at the scene of action."

He drew rein as he spoke, and the wagon came to such an abrupt standstill as to nearly precipitate Drawback over the dashboard.

"At the 'Devil's Gap,' eh?" ejaculated Rawdige, looking around keenly.

"As you see," declared Burrows, hastening to get out of the wagon. "Hand out those axes, Theo."

Drawback hastened to comply, as both he and Rawdge followed their leader.

"But what's our little game?" queried Drawback, somewhat nervously. "We're not going to 'hold up' the stage, I suppose?"

"No," answered Burrows. "You see yonder pine? Fall it into the Gap, between you, while I go and hide the horse and wagon."

The two men entered upon their task without remark, while Burrows took his horse by the bits and led him away in a half-overgrown lateral path.

When he came back, the stately pine indicated lay across the Gap, completely closing the trail against all vehicles.

"There," said Burrows. "When the stage reaches this point, it will have to go around the obstruction. There are two ways of doing this. One is to go a mile east, where there is a cut through the ridge which is almost a counterpart of this. The other way will be to pull the stage up the ridge anywhere to the right or left of us, at an angle, in places, of twenty-five or thirty degrees. It is impossible to foresee just which course will be taken, but the most natural and likely course is to ask the passengers to alight and cross on foot, when the empty stage can be readily taken across it anywhere by the horses."

"This latter is the course Tom Sawyer'll take," said Rawdge. "What next?"

"Why, we'll intercept Sam Hooper while he's climbing the ledge on foot, and take him prisoner, with all due neatness and dispatch, gagging him and binding him hand and foot, and hurrying away with him to our wagon. An hour thereafter, he will be a close prisoner at my house, and the rest will be easy."

A brief silence succeeded, the hearers pondering earnestly upon the proposed proceedings.

"Of course there's a chance that the stage will take the other gap," added Burrows, "or that the passengers will be numerous and stick together, so that nothing will come of our project!"

"Of course," returned Rawdge. "But there is also a chance that everything will favor us, and that we shall make a complete success of the project. In any case, I do not see that we're incurring any great risk or danger."

"Nor do I," said Drawback. "We'll hide and watch in a favorable situation, and act only in the case that all the chances and conditions are in our favor."

The serious features of the project were further discussed, as the three men proceeded to stow themselves away in a thicket overlooking the Gap and the surrounding country.

"We must of course be guided by circumstances," then said Burrows, by way of conclusion. "If there are a dozen passengers in the stage, we must remain as quiet and still as mice, taking good care not to be seen by them. On the other hand, if Sam Hooper should be alone, I shall be ready for almost any sort of risk or work, before I'll allow thirty or forty thousand dollars to slip through my fingers!"

"Oh, if he's alone," said Drawback, clutching his rifle nervously, "I'd sooner kill him at sight than run the least risk of losing the money! How long have we to wait, Burrows?"

The doctor produced a cheap silver watch and held its face under Drawback's gaze.

"What! Nearly an hour!" ejaculated the latter. "What a bore! How disgusting!"

"Silence!" suddenly enjoined Rawdge. "What's that coming?"

The two listened, with their eyes on the trail, to the northward.

"It's not the stage," muttered Burrows. "Merely a clatter of hoofs!"

"And what a clatter!" breathed Rawdge. "Who can it be?"

"Watch and wait," enjoined Thad Burrows, a shadow crossing his face. "We shall soon have your answer!"

CHAPTER III.

A SURPRISE FOR THE PLOTTERS.

THE next instant a horseman dashed into view, approaching at a smart gallop.

He was barely three-and-twenty years of age, but he had that experienced, self-possessed and commanding air which belongs naturally to one who has passed his days amid the stirring scenes and adventures of the great Wild West.

He not only possessed the manly beauty of a hero, with the free grace of a plainsman, and the keen and intelligent look of a business man, but also the gentle and thoughtful mien of a man of society, with the best of social characteristics, and all the charms conferred by education and culture.

The horse he rode could have served as a model of equine beauty, vigor, and grace, and he was followed by two others which, although neither bridled or led, had been so well trained that they kept close to him.

"Know him?" queried Burrows, looking in turn at each of his companions.

"Never saw him before," answered Rawdge.

"He's evidently a stranger to these parts," declared Drawback. "May be one of the cattle barons from the Oklahoma Country."

As he rode nearer, the horseman noticed the

obstruction in his path, and gradually drew rein, with very watchful and inquiring glances in every direction around him.

"Will he climb the ridge?" muttered Burrows. "Or will he go around by the other gap?"

"That'll probably depend upon where he is bound to," suggested Rawdge.

"Or, how tired his horses are," said Drawback.

"Or whether he's in a hurry or not," observed Burrows. "See! he comes to a halt!"

"And looks to see if any one's lying in wait for him!" said Drawback.

These measures had indeed been taken by the young horseman.

"Evidently he's at a loss just what to do," suggested Rawdge, as he continued to scan the young stranger.

"Not at all," returned Burrows. "Look!"

With a final glance around, the young stranger had opened a small valise he carried at his left side, by means of a strap passing over his shoulder, and had taken out a small, thin object, which the observers took to be a pocket-book.

"Perhaps he means to pay his way," sneered Rawdge.

"Wait," rejoined Burrows, as the shadow upon his face deepened.

Slipping gracefully to the ground, the horseman approached the great pine tree, the trunk of which rested upon the stubs of several huge limbs which had been broken off within three or four feet of their source.

The Gap was so crowded with these broken limbs that it was not easy for the stranger, with all his agility to gain the barrier the trunk of the tree presented, but he soon stood upon it, and from this advantageous point of observation he bent a new survey around him.

It was not difficult to see that the tree had been purposely felled into the Gap, but the placid and even smiling expression of the young stranger's features attested that he regarded the act as the playful freak of some cowboy, and not as a step in some scheme of violence or murder.

Satisfied with the conclusions thus reached, the young stranger placed upon the top of the fallen trunk, and not far from its center, the small package he had taken from his valise, and then applied a burning match to something resembling a wick at one side of it.

Pausing nearly long enough to see that the desired effect had been wrought by the burning match, he threw it away and hastened back to his horses, mounting the one he had previously been riding, and retracing his steps a hundred yards or more, to a point where he and his horses were concealed from the view of the watchers by one of the banks of a water-course and the trees growing upon it.

"Now what does that mean?" asked Rawdge, breaking the breathless silence with which the three plotters had given their attention to the stranger's proceedings. "He seems to have left a paper of tobacco on the trunk of the tree!"

"No, it's something burning," opined Drawback. "What can it be? In any case, he seems inclined to go back from whence he came."

"Then what is he doing behind that bank of gravel?" asked Burrows.

"He's simply watering his horses—"

At this point of the conversation there came an explosion which seemed to shake the very earth beneath the feet of the plotters, and a shower of wood, gravel, and stone, sprung into the sky, and was scattered far and wide in every direction.

"Great Scott!" cried Rawdge, leaping to his feet and bounding from his concealment, followed by his comrades. "Look at the Gap!"

Of all that giant pine, which had so completely barricaded the trail, there were not enough splinters and fragments left in the Gap to kindle a fire!

The entire spot where the tree had lain had been swept clean, as if by some mighty besom!

And even as Rawdge stood pointing at the Gap, with outstretched arm, the young stranger rode into view from the covert where he had witnessed the explosion, and took his way anew toward the Gap, followed closely by his two extra horses.

A few moments only, he remained in view—barely long enough to wave a graceful, smiling adieu to the three consternated and defeated plotters—and then he swept through the Gap at a swinging gallop, vanishing in the direction of the Kingfisher Creek Stage Station.

"Come, boys! That's enough for me!" cried Thad Burrows, as he began retracing his steps toward the trail. "Let's get back to our wagon, and push for home as fast as the old nag can carry us!"

"What! Are you scared out, doctor?" cried Rawdge. "Won't you wait for the stage?"

"The stage be blessed!" roared Thad Burrows. "We have no further call to wait for it! There's no one in it we care to see!"

"What do you mean, doctor?"

"I mean that the man who has just given us the slip so neatly is no other than Sam Hooper!"

CHAPTER IV.

SAM HOOPER.

THAD BURROWS was right!

The horseman who had so cleverly passed the obstruction of "Devil's Gap" was indeed the renowned young cattle-dealer who had been the object of so many sinister attentions.

It was true that he had engaged passage in the stage, as Colonel Vann and Thad Burrows had been informed by their watchful correspondents, but this measure had been taken as a blind, and not because Sam had the least intention of becoming one of Tom Sawyer's southward bound passengers.

As was only natural, Sam was keenly aware that his life and fortune were menaced by many an outlaw upon the Abilene Cattle Trail, and he had fully made up his mind to beat them all in his own way in the game they were playing.

As one step toward this end, he had preceded the stage by an hour or two, with the three magnificent horses we have had the pleasure of seeing, and it had not been at all difficult for him to maintain the advance he had thus taken.

If his enemies had their secret correspondents, telegraphic ciphers, and other private resources, Sam Hooper also had his, as we shall have occasion to see in due course.

If they were sharp, he was sharper.

As to how he happened to be possessed of the dynamite which had rendered him such good service, that is a matter which we may safely leave him to explain at the right time and place.

It is enough to say here that he had entered the Territory with very serious intentions, and that he had resolved to wage war against his enemies with such vigor as to leave them definitely annihilated or defeated.

As has been already indicated, Sam and his father were residents of the rapidly growing city of Wichita, Kansas, and were known far and wide as one of the largest firms of cattle-dealers in the country.

Their fortune was generally estimated to exceed a million.

They occupied one of the finest dwellings in Wichita, and stood at the very top of the social ladder, Sam's mother, who was still a charmingly beautiful woman, being especially prominent in all good ways and works.

Although not yet married, Sam was engaged to the only daughter of one of the most prominent families in the country, and expected to become a benedict early in the coming autumn.

He had traveled extensively since leaving college, and was considered to be one of the most promising young men in Kansas, as is well proven by the fact that prominent leaders of his party were already speaking of putting him in nomination for one of the highest offices within the gift of the people.

But it was not of these agreeable facts and circumstances that Sam was thinking, as he thus dashed furiously along the Abilene Cattle Trail.

To the contrary, he was wholly absorbed in the background of these charming pictures.

He was, in fact, both angry and disgusted.

In less than nine weeks he had lost twenty-seven hundred head of cattle out of a drove hardly exceeding six thousand.

Lost them out of camp and drove at different times, while they were on their way northward from Texas through the Territory.

Lost them in summer!

Lost them when the prairies were covered by the best of grasses!

Just how had he lost them?

That was exactly what Sam Hooper wanted to know!

He was very earnestly in quest of information.

So earnestly that he had left his home in Kansas, at an early hour of the previous day, and had since taken his way as directly as possible to the spot where we find him.

In a general way, Sam had learned that his missing cattle had been *stampeded*, but he felt that it must be a very strange sort of stampede indeed which could take twenty-seven hundred head of cattle away from his cowboys so utterly that neither horn nor hide were left to tell him what had happened!

Three or four steers had died, and as many more had been stolen by tramps or red-skins, but there had been no question of sickness in the drove, and it was really a great puzzle to Sam how such a large number of his cattle had vanished.

As earnestly as he pondered upon these things, he did not fail to leave the trail soon after passing the Gap, striking out into the prairies to the westward, and directing his course toward the high ground where the headwaters of the Kingfisher Creek have their source.

He held to this new course for five or six miles, while the glances he bestowed upon his surroundings became more and more active and earnest.

"The boys must be somewhere hereabouts," he at length ejaculated, drawing rein and looking searchingly around. "The agent at Baker's Stage Station said they were in this neighborhood this morning!"

As he stood up on his saddle, looking and listening, the sound of hoofs suddenly resounded upon his hearing, proceeding from a point a hundred rods directly ahead of him.

His face brightened vividly.

He seemed to recognize the new-comer's style of riding.

His view of the point in question was intercepted by a fringe of bushes lining a water-course, but his hearing told him that the horseman was rapidly coming nearer, and at the end of a few moments he was seen to emerge from the cover of the bushes to which we have alluded.

"Comanche Jim, as I thought!" cried Sam Hooper, with a flush of delight, as he resumed his seat in the saddle. "I knew I could not be far out of my reckoning!"

His face glowing with joy and relief, he hastily advanced to meet the new comer, and in a few moments more drew rein beside him.

CHAPTER V.

COMANCHE JIM.

COMANCHE JIM was another of those grand young heroes of which the Wild West is so prolific.

A handsomer, more manly, more attractive figure, was never seen in the saddle.

His age was not far from that of his young employer.

They had, in fact, been boys at school together, and had always been associated in the closest of ties, and consequently in the most perfect and sympathetic of friendships.

Jim had repeatedly been offered an interest in the firm, but had declined, through mistaken notions of independence, and especially through a vague apprehension that his friendship for Sam might suffer from a closer association in business, as has so often been the case with the friendships of others.

"It is a treat to see you again, Sam," said Comanche Jim, with kindling eyes, as he shook the long hair back from his face, and grasped the hand of his friend and companion. "I've never been more anxious than during the last hour. I was afraid I might miss you!"

"I am delighted to see you, my dear Jim," returned Sam Hooper. "But you look unusually nervous. What's up?"

"To begin with," explained Jim, "there's an ambuscade of seven men waiting for you in Bushy Hollow, on the Kingfisher Creek Trail!"

"An ambuscade?" repeated Sam, beginning to share the excitement of his faithful ally. "Seven men in waiting! For what?"

"To kill you!" pursued Jim. "It is believed that you are coming in the stage, and that you will leave the stage at Kingfisher Creek Station, where I have left a horse, as you suggested."

"Well, Jim?"

"It is also believed that you will take the Kingfisher Creek Trail," resumed Jim, "to reach the spot where the drove is feeding, and hence the ambuscade in question."

"But who is at the head of the plot?" demanded the young cattle-dealer.

"Can't you guess who?"

"No more than I can guess whether there are living men on the moon or not!"

"But have you no idea, not even a suspicion, who has been waging such war upon you within a year or two?"

"Well, yes—a sort of suspicion has dawned upon me since I left home," avowed Sam. "The truth is, my father and I have long had a terrible enemy it would not be wise to leave out of the account at such a moment, although we have not yet secured a single fact concerning him to build upon in this connection!"

"And what is the name of this enemy?"

"John Vann, or Colonel Vann, as he is in the habit of calling himself."

Comanche Jim smiled significantly, as he faced his horse about, with a view to retracing his steps in the direction from which he had come, and Sam Hooper lost no time in executing a like movement.

"That's the man who is waiting at Bushy Hollow to kill you," said Jim.

"Sure of this?"

"Yes, Sam. I not only saw the six men taking their way thither, under the leadership of Vann's factotum—a thorough miscreant called Weezy—but I have since seen Colonel Vann hurrying in the same direction. To make sure of the matter, I have taken the trouble to ride through Bushy Hollow myself, and have made such discoveries as to be absolutely certain of what I tell you."

He proceeded to mention these discoveries, such as the footprints all these men and horses had left in taking possession of the Hollow, and which, as rapidly as he had traversed the depression, as related, he had remarked throughout its whole extent, and especially at the sides, where the ambuscaders had vanished into the bushes.

"And you've ridden through that ambuscade on my account, Jim?" cried Sam Hooper.

"Naturally, else how could I be certain of its existence?"

There was a suspicious moisture in Sam's eyes as he leaned out of the saddle and drew his de-

voted associate to his heart as fervently as any lover ever embraced the girl of his choice.

"If you're ever killed, Jim," he declared, "it will be for my sake. But what else is there new in this quarter?"

"Just one more plot against your well-being and safety, that's all," and Jim smiled now with his wonted light-heartedness, as he scanned the face of the young cattle-dealer as admiringly as affectionately.

"Indeed? Who's the offender this time?"

"An old fellow named Thad Burrows, who lives on the bluffs just north of the Cimarron River—Burrows, in fact, and a couple of associates of his own pattern!"

"And what does he want?"

"He wants to rob you. He has a brother in Caldwell, who telegraphed him that you are again on your way to Texas to buy cattle, literally loaded with money—"

"Ah, I saw that brother hanging about the stage office, and I now remember, from the likeness between the two, that I saw Thad Burrows himself the last time I passed over the trail northward. But how did these worthies propose to rob me?"

"Well, they thought, like the others, that you'd come by the stage, and their plan was to fell a pine tree into that deep cut—"

He was interrupted by Sam's hearty laughter.

"I've had the pleasure of meeting the gentlemen," explained the latter. "And also of taking my leave of them in good style, as I will explain later."

"They didn't prove dangerous?"

"Not in the least."

"I thought they wouldn't, as I had bribed one of them—a drunken chap named Drawback—to keep me posted concerning the plot, under promise of having a barrel of whisky. Besides, the fact that you did not come by stage was in itself enough to defeat these Three Graces!"

"I knew from various sources, including your reports, Jim," said Sam, "that there were plots against me in this quarter, and that is why I decided to play that little trick—to really come with my own horses, while giving out that I would come by the stage. But these perils are all neatly averted, thanks to your devotion. And now to speak of other matters!"

CHAPTER VI.

JIM'S EXPLANATIONS.

SAM spoke to one of his extra horses, which seemed inclined to wander, now that its place was filled by the new-comers, and then turned anew to Jim.

"Where are the cattle?" he asked.

"About two miles northwest of us?"

"All well?"

"Never more so."

"Do the stampedes continue?"

"Almost daily. Perhaps I should say almost nightly, as they generally take place in the night."

"You've added to your cowboys, as I suggested?"

"A couple, but it's no use."

"That strange steer keeps turning up?"

Jim assented.

"Have you had any more shots at it since latest reports?"

"Three, I think."

"And you missed him every time?"

"He got away, Sam—that's all I can say," declared Jim, with ill-concealed chagrin. "And yet I never had fairer shots at anything in my life!"

Sam smiled as pleasantly as indulgently.

"I think I understand the matter," he declared. "You have allowed yourself to get excited over these stampedes, and have not done yourself justice, as is natural enough, considering the hurry and darkness. Let me get a good shot at this steer, and I'll guarantee that he'll make no more trouble!"

"I only hope you'll soon have the honor of making his personal acquaintance," said Jim, with smiling seriousness. "He's the biggest thorn that has ever turned up in my trail, Sam!"

"Is there one steer, or several?"

"Well, that is a question I can now undertake to answer. The last time that I saw him he was as black as a coal, but the time next to the last he was as white as milk!"

Sam Hooper started.

"And on other occasions," added Jim, "I have seen him display other colors—for instance, red, mottled, brindle, black and white, and almost every other color common to cattle!"

The surprise of Sam became a keen curiosity.

"Why, this looks as if there were a whole drove of these steers," he said.

"Not necessarily, Sam!"

"Why not?"

"These different colors may all be a mere question of paint!"

"What! you think there is only one steer in the case, and that he is painted a different color every time he makes his appearance?"

"I incline to this opinion."

"Any particular reason?"

"Yes, several, the principal of which is that it would be an extraordinary task, if not a

wholly impossible one, to train a number of steers to do what this one is doing!"

"Your reasoning is sound, Jim. Without going beyond your last suggestion, I am quite of your opinion. We may take it for granted that the difference in these colors is simply a difference of paint. In other terms, we have only one steer to deal with."

"That's all, Sam, depend upon it," answered Jim. "But he's worthy of his name! He's a veritable demon! But what are you smiling at?"

"You'll remember, no doubt, that you used that phrase in one of your latest letters?"

Jim nodded thoughtfully.

"Well, that phrase gave me an idea that you had got a regular crank in the bovine line down this way, and I accordingly made up my mind to resort to heroic measures, if necessary, to hurl the said 'demon' to an adequate destruction. In a word, I have brought along with me," and he tapped his valise significantly, "a few plugs of dynamite, and it will be singular if I fail to give Mr. Steer a dose that will secure his quietus!"

"Capital, Sam! Dynamite is just the thing for that steer, and perhaps the only feed that would cause him an indigestion! But how dare you carry the stuff? Won't it explode?"

"Not so long as it's properly handled. It's not like nitro-glycerine, you know. Besides, I've got it carefully packed in cotton, and shall rid myself of it as soon as we reach camp. You shall hear what a good turn it has done me already. When I reached the 'Devil's Gap,' I found that Thad Burrows and his friends had felled a large pine across the trail—"

"Yes, that was the programme!"

"But they might as well have spared themselves this trouble," said the young cattle-dealer, with another cheery laugh at the recollection. "All I had to do was to put a cake of dynamite on the trunk of the fallen tree and set fire to the fuse. By the time I had beaten a retreat, with the horses, to a place of safety, there came an explosion which ground that tree in pieces as thoroughly as if it had been passed through a mill!"

"And Thad and his friends?"

"Oh, they had concealed themselves in a thicket on the ridge, after barricading the trail, and I did not see anything of them until after the explosion!"

"It's a pity they didn't take a sail skyward on that cake of dynamite," said Jim, with a frankness born of his recent perils and annoyances. "They're a bad lot, Sam. They're sure to turn up again before we've crossed the Cimarron!"

"Well, let 'em show up as often as they like," returned young Hooper. "I reckon we can hold our own every time. By the way, Jim, you said in your last letter that you hoped to soon find out who owns and runs the 'Demon Steer!' Have you done so?"

"Oh, yes—I have carried that point, but not with absolute certainty till yesterday."

"And who is he?"

"He's that same miscreant who's waiting in Bushy Hollow at this moment to kill you!"

"What! John Vann?"

"Yes, Colonel Vann!"

An almost startled cry came from the young cattle-dealer at this declaration.

"Sure?" he queried.

"Perfectly, Sam! The last time I saw the steer, I also saw Colonel Vann with it!"

What a flood of new light came pouring into Sam's soul with these revelations!

A strange pallor invaded his face, and he stared vacantly into space, thoughtful and silent.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SITUATION STATED.

FROM the preceding explanations, the reader will begin to comprehend the nature of the trouble which had overtaken Comanche Jim and his employer.

Ten weeks previous to the date of our narrative, Sam had purchased six thousand head of cattle in Henrietta, Texas, at an average price of eighteen dollars per head.

This drove he had placed in charge of Comanche Jim and half a dozen cowboys, with orders to drive them across Indian Territory, at the usual pace of a few miles a day, with more or less lingering in all places where the feed was unusually good.

Henrietta is the southern terminus of the stages which traverse the Abilene Cattle Trail, and young Hooper hastened to avail himself of this fact as soon as he had seen his cattle started toward their destination.

In other words, he had taken the stage for home, as was his custom in like circumstances, the business of the firm requiring his close personal attention.

Of course Jim and his cowboys had been supplied with every facility and convenience, as well as every necessary resource, for carrying out the obligations resting upon them.

They had an abundance of horses.

They had a prairie schooner of such size and substance, including such substantial furnishings, that it was generally termed the "castle."

This was their abode in bad weather and on the march.

It was also their general armory, store-house, tool-chest, and rendezvous.

There were beds enough in the schooner to accommodate the whole party.

They also had a wall tent which was large enough to have contained a camp-meeting or a company of soldiers.

This wall tent was pitched whenever the feed became so promising as to indicate that a halt of several days' duration was advisable, and it naturally, from its superior accommodations, became the abode of Jim and his men from the moment of its erection until the hour of its removal.

The table was excellent, not to speak of the delicacies in the way of game which the cowboys secured with their own rifles or purchased for a trifle of the red-skins and hunters who took occasion to saunter into their camp.

As to arms, any of the cowboys could have discounted the average highwayman or pirate, and there was no dearth of ammunition.

Young Hooper's intention had been for the boys to have a "walk-over," as had so often been the case, but his good intentions had been strangely, terribly negated.

From the moment of leaving Henrietta, Jim and his men had found themselves and their cattle the objects of the most sinister attentions.

In a word, they had become the prey of a gang of stampedeers.

If these stampedeers had been simply men, or if they had shown themselves, a few bullets well planted would have cured the evil; but the chief stampeder was a herculean Texas steer, which had seldom been seen, and which had the peculiar faculty of stampeding the drove even before the cowboys became aware of its presence.

How this was done, will be seen in due course of our narrative.

If a portion of the cattle thus stampeded could have been pursued and recovered—as is generally the case—the loss would not have been so annoying, even if their recovery had cost a marked outlay of time and toil, but it was very rare for Jim and his men to recover a single steer, even when hundreds had been rushed off in a body!

Where they could all go to, was a problem which had nearly driven Jim and his assistants frantic, and which was still as far from solution as ever.

As a consequence of these continual raids, the drove had lost about three hundred head of cattle weekly.

As a consequence, too, of this situation of affairs, Comanche Jim and his men had been kept on duty day and night, instead of having that easy time which so generally attends the conductors of these "cattle excursions" across the Indian Territory.

Of course all these events and proceedings had produced such a sensation throughout the Territory as has seldom been witnessed.

The whole talk of the neighborhood had become impregnated with the feats of the steer in question.

Some called it the "Demon Stampeder."

Others spoke of it as the "Phantom Steer."

The red-skins who inhabit the Territory were generally inclined to believe that the animal, if not the "Evil One" himself, was at least an infernal apparition.

But the truth had gradually made its way, despite the mystery in which it was enveloped.

Comanche Jim, as we have seen, had dismissed his first idea of a dozen or more stampeding steers, and had reached the conclusion that a single animal, well trained and well handled, had wrought all the mischief he had been obliged to report to his employer.

Jim had also scored an important point by discovering that the steer was *run* by Colonel Vann, and he was fully resolved to push this fact to its natural and legitimate harvest.

A thousand relevant questions were already shaping themselves in Jim's mind.

Who and what was this Vann?

What was he doing in the Indian Territory?

Who were his associates?

What were his projects, and what the motives by which he was actuated?

What had become of all the cattle he and his "Demon Steer" had run out of the drove since its departure from Henrietta?

This latter question was, for various material reasons, the most puzzling of all those pressing upon Jim's mind, and he had no difficulty in realizing that a great deal remained to be done before he could deem himself even fairly posted in regard to his surroundings.

Nevertheless, he applied himself to the task. So that his thoughts, too, were as busy as bees, as he rode beside the young cattle-dealer in the direction of their drove and camp.

CHAPTER VIII.

JIM'S FURTHER REVELATIONS.

THE young cattle-dealer was the first to speak. "What do you know about this Colonel Vann?" he demanded.

"Only what I have learned within a day or

two, Sam," was the reply. "I never heard of him till we crossed the Canadian, at Foote Island, last Sunday, but since then he has loomed up in various ways upon our attention, and I have been very active in my inquiries."

"Where does he live, Jim?"

"He occupies Salt Island, which is just above the mouth of Salt Creek, in the Cimarron River."

"A dozen or fifteen miles to the north of us?"

"Just about."

"How large is Salt Island?"

"It's about a mile in length by half a mile in breadth, certainly three hundred acres."

"Is it wooded?"

"Lightly so along the shores, but the interior, although somewhat sandy in places, presents a fair bit of prairie, with feed for a large number of cattle."

"The river must be a mile wide at that point, Jim?"

"It's nearer a mile and a half, counting the island, each of its arms being nearly half a mile in width."

"Any other particulars?"

"Yes. The channel is on the east side of the island, and usually carries too much water for any one to undertake to ford or swim it. Here the current is always rapid, even at low water. On the west side, to the contrary, the stream is shallow, not having more than four feet of water in the deepest place, and even this depth for not more than two or three rods, except during floods, or in the rainy season."

"Who owns the island?"

"It belongs to the Cheyenne and Arapaho Reservation, being about four miles from its northern boundary. I have not yet learned by what title Colonel Vann is in possession of the spot, but we may take it for granted that he has secured some sort of a lease from the chiefs of the Arapahoes and Cheyennes."

"What does the colonel do there?"

"He pretends to be a rancher."

"He must have cattle, then?"

"Yes—several hundred head. The eastern bank of the river abreast of Salt Island is leased by Tuttle & Co., the well-known cattle firm, so that Vann cannot feed his stock in that direction, but I am told that he makes about as much use of the western bank and the adjoining prairies of the Cherokee Outlet as he pleases."

"The spot must be lonely."

"Very; there's not a single house within twenty miles, or nearer than Buffalo Spring Stage Station."

"No camp of the red-skins either?"

"None, Sam."

All these details seemed to Sam Hooper of the most significant interest.

"Speaking of houses," he resumed, "has Colonel Vann built at Salt Island?"

"I cannot say whether he built or whether he found a place ready for occupancy," replied Jim, "but it's none the less a fact that he is installed on Salt Island in a very elaborate fashion. He lives in a two-story frame dwelling which would not be out of place anywhere. It is painted white, and is surrounded by the neatest of gardens, walks and lawns. At the south, or lower end of the island, where there is a sheltered nook, which may almost be deemed a bay, there is a small wharf, a number of cattle-yards, with high fences, and a slaughter-house of no mean proportions, behind which, to the north, is another cattle-yard, with such a high stockade around it that it would be no easy matter to survey the interior of the inclosure without a ladder."

Sam Hooper looked more thoughtful than ever, appearing like one fascinated, or in a trance.

These unexpected revelations had evidently made a profound impression upon him.

The allusion to a "slaughter-house" had especially arrested his attention.

"It is *there* that our missing cattle are slaughtered," he said to himself. "But what is done with the beef and other products?"

He remained absorbed in reflections of this nature for several minutes.

"How many men has Colonel Vann on the island with him?" he then asked.

"He certainly has many more than is required on any ranch of three hundred acres," answered Comanche Jim. "So many, in fact, that he has had no difficulty in sparing seven of them for his murderous ambushade at Bushy Hollow."

"I see," thought Sam. "These swarms of men are the butchers of the stolen cattle, or else Colonel Vann is at the head of a band of robbers. Even both of these suppositions may be literally true."

Again he reflected earnestly a minute or two, appearing to lose himself to his surroundings.

"Has he many horses, Jim?" suddenly asked the young cattle-dealer.

"A great number, Sam," was the response; "perhaps twenty or thirty."

"Ah, I thought so!" cried Sam. "He's ready, you see, to ride in any direction, at any moment, with twenty or thirty cut-throats at his heels to do his bidding! A very dangerous neighbor, I would say! One that may at any moment prove a disagreeable visitor or intruder."

"That's true, Sam."

"And such being the case, Jim," continued young Hooper, "we shall have to be a little more active and watchful than ever, now that I am in this vicinity, and that I have so narrowly escaped the ambushade set for me at Bushy Hollow."

Comanche Jim bowed gravely.

He comprehended only too well that the advent of his young employer upon the scene must necessarily open new floodgates of care and peril.

"In a word, Jim," added Sam, "we must look well to ourselves, or that man will crush us as one crushes an egg-shell. I shall have more to say concerning him in the course of the afternoon, and you will then comprehend more clearly than now that he's a man from whom the worst is to be apprehended. To the best of our knowledge and belief, he must have at his command five or six ruffians for every honest man in my employ. If the situation does not clear up promptly, it will become my duty to ask for a guard of soldiers from Fort Reno, as it is simply out of the question that I should allow you all to be massacred ruthlessly in my service."

The joyful barking of dogs resounded at this moment, and the horses of the travelers pricked up their ears and quickened their pace, one or two of them neighing, as if in response to the barking.

"Ah, here we are," added Sam, as he bent a keen glance ahead, "and I must say that for once I shall be glad to get out of the saddle."

"And I too," returned Comanche Jim. "I've been on the go since daybreak."

"And yet you didn't sleep a wink last night, I'm certain."

"Well—no."

Sam sighed, and his face clouded. His sensations were very similar to those of a man arriving "at the front," or at the seat of war.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CATTLE CAMP.

THE eyes of Sam Hooper took in at a glance the scene of beauty spread out before him.

There was the immense prairie, with its green, velvety carpet, which is seen in all its loveliness only where men and cattle are habitually absent.

There were the water-courses by which this prairie was literally checkered, and in which ran the purest water.

There were trees lining these water-courses, and presenting green barriers of waving and winding verdure which vied with the flower-gemmed patches of emerald inclosed between them!

There were his cattle, some of them feeding, others lying down, but all of them occupying less than a hundred acres.

There were his cowboys, armed and mounted, and all of them maintaining as strict a watch without the camp as within.

There were his horses and dogs, his tent, his prairie schooner, and all the other characteristics of his temporary home, even to the jolly and rotund figure of old Filkins, the cook, who was busy at his labors at an improvised fireplace beside the tent.

"The boys will be delighted to see you, Sam," said Comanche Jim, when he had caressed and silenced the dogs which came forth to meet him.

"In ordinary times they'd all be at the tent before you are, and give you a rousing welcome, but just now they'll hardly venture to leave their posts in a body. They'll content themselves with presenting their respects singly, as opportunity offers."

"Is Bartle still with you?"

"Yes, and as faithful and efficient as ever. I hardly know what I should have done during the last few days without him."

"Are you satisfied with your two new cowboys?"

"In every way."

"You have no doubt of their honesty and good faith?"

"Not the least."

"What are their names?"

"Crossman and Jenkins."

"Who and what are they, and where did you pick them up?"

"They are both discharged soldiers, and came directly here from Fort Reno. Crossman, in fact, is a brother of the well-known Crossman who has so long been a drill-sergeant and orderly at that post. Of course they had much to learn about handling cattle, and I have been at some trouble to teach them, but I have gladly taken this course for the sake of having two such valuable additions to our force."

"Quite right, Jim," commented young Hooper, with an involuntary sigh of relief. "All told, then, there are eleven of us, counting Filkins?"

"Yes, Sam. But what are you thinking of?"

"I'm simply passing in review our strength, with an eye to possible contingencies," answered the young cattle-dealer, with the serious air to which we have before alluded. "You are sure there's nothing wrong about any of these men?"

"As sure as one can be of anything in this world, my dear Sam."

"You have seen no signs of treachery in the camp, Jim? No showing of lights or other signals? Nothing to hint at even an acquaintance with Colonel Vann or any of his people?"

"Nothing of the sort, Sam! I'd stake my life upon the honor and devotion of all these men. Nearly all of them, you know, have been with us for years, in one capacity or another, and as to Crossman and Jenkins, the latest arrivals, I took them from Fort Reno the day of their discharge from a service of three years. The officers and men of their regiment, as far as heard from, could not find anything too good to say in favor of their departing comrades."

"I see! You've been lucky in securing them," and Sam drew another long sigh of relief. "Of course you won't be annoyed at my questions. I am anxious to see my way as clearly as possible into all our surroundings. We must look out for spies, Jim, and even worse intruders. The mere fact that John Vann is running that steer is enough to tell me that we shall have trouble before we emerge from this reservation, to say nothing of our march across Cherokee Cutlet."

"I approve of all you say and do, of course," assured Jim. "I need not say how much I am relieved to have you here at such a critical moment. Ah, here comes Bartle!"

Bartle was the youngest of the cowboys in Sam's service, but he was also the one Sam admired and trusted the most after Comanche Jim, having known him from childhood.

As Bartle happened to be employed at the moment on the side of the camp by which his employer reached it, he could do no less than come to meet him and exchange a few words of greeting.

He was as strong and agile as he was good-looking, and it was with a keen appreciation in his glance that Sam looked after him, as he returned to his post.

"I always leave Bartle in charge in my absences," said Comanche Jim, as he and Sam resumed progress toward the tent. "He's so prompt in his decisions, and so clear-headed—so competent to meet any sudden emergency that may present itself—that I regard him as the best man at our disposal."

"I agree with you, Jim. How many of the boys are on duty?"

"Only four. The others are asleep."

"I see the drove covers less than half the space usually assigned it."

"Yes. I have kept it half-rounded up ever since we crossed the Canadian, for the reason that we are liable to have a visit from the stampedeers at any moment. As you see, we have planted ourselves here rather more elaborately than at any other point since we left Henrietta. This is not merely because we intended to stay here until your arrival, but also because we have felt compelled to take some precautions. We have rapped up a sort of shed for the horses, and have raised a regular barricade, with rifle-pits, around the 'schooner.' Perhaps you've noticed that grove beyond the tent?"

Sam assented, turning his glances anew in the direction indicated.

"Well, we took the trouble this morning to make a corral there by inclosing within ropes a space large enough to contain all our cattle. As you can see from here, the central space of the grove is almost treeless, while the ring of trees around this space serve as so many posts to support our ropes!"

"A timely move, Jim," said Sam. "Have you noticed any signs of another raid?"

"Only what the wind and weather affords," replied Comanche Jim, as he held up his hand to the breeze and sent a keen glance into the sky. "The villains generally come with a war of the elements—once in a tremendous shower, another time in a gale of wind, and the first time, when we were beset by the worst storm of wind and rain I have ever seen, even in Texas."

"You look for them to-night, then?"

"I can at least say that they will come if the night should be particularly dark and stormy. I notice various signs of a coming thunderstorm, and, if it comes, the enemy will be sure to avail himself of it."

The young cattle-dealer surveyed the heavens a few moments, while an unusually serious look took possession of his features.

"We'll do our best to be ready for them, Jim," he said, with an involuntary glance at the valise containing his dynamite. "Have you killed any of them thus far?"

"Not to my knowledge, Sam."

"Then we must prepare to make a good beginning in that direction. Colonel Vann must be taught a lesson."

The subject was dropped at this point, for the couple were not within a few rods of their canvas dwelling, and old Filkins was hastening to meet his employer.

CHAPTER X.

PERTINENT SUGGESTIONS.

IN the course of an hour Sam had greeted all his employees, enjoyed a good dinner with Jim, and taken his way through the camp and drove, carefully noting everything he encountered.

"I do not see as you have left anything undone," he said. "But all you tell me leaves me more puzzled than ever!"

"How so, Sam?"

"Why, I cannot comprehend how these men can stampede our cattle without showing themselves—a feat, it seems, they have been in the habit of performing. Is not this very extraordinary and wonderful, Jim?"

"It certainly is," was the response. "Let me tell you how it is done. We are here, and the drove is feeding. No matter the hour. Everything is quiet. Suddenly a sort of thrill seems to traverse the drove. Every head is raised. The attention of every animal becomes fixed in a certain quarter. Then there is a sudden and general plunge in that direction. No use to hallo and whip! It would be mere folly for even a score of men and horses to attempt to arrest the tide. You must get out of the way, or be run down and run over! The whole drove acts like mad! Away they go for miles! The only way we can break the stampede is to run them into some ravine, or into some wood, or against some ridge. To be candid, they seem to be following some scent. This view is strengthened by the fact that they invariably run to the windward!"

"Ah! I see! The enemy salts them!" cried Sam. "That is to say, he dissolves a lot of salt just under their noses, as it were, to the windward, and this pungent odor sets them wild."

"I had some theory of that kind at first," returned Jim, "and took good care to give the cattle all the salt they wanted. I even scattered it around until they had become perfectly indifferent to it!"

"In that case, we shall have to look further for our explanation."

"That's what I've been doing," avowed Comanche Jim smilingly, "but I must confess that I am as free as ever from a solution."

"Don't you detect any scent in the air at the moment of these stampedes?"

"None whatever, Sam. And yet it's there, I cannot doubt. The fact that the cattle always run to windward is a proof that they are fascinated by some odor in the air!"

The young cattle-dealer mused a few moments in silence.

"There can be only one explanation of the mystery," he then said. "That Colonel Vann has discovered something of which cattle are very fond!"

"That's possible!"

"And all he has to do is to soak that infernal steer with this something until his hide and hair fairly reeks with it, and then he drives the creature to the windward of our drove, which at once takes the scent!"

"Good! You're on the right track now, Sam! That Vann is really a scientist! He has made a study of the taste of cattle, and has found something which pleases a steer just as much as the smell of whisky captivates an old toper!"

"That's it, Jim!"

"This something is very subtle, and at the same time very fascinating. It sets a steer frantic, when a man isn't even able to perceive it. But there's nothing strange about that. Everybody knows that the olfactory organs of animals are ten-fold or a hundred-fold—possibly a thousand-fold—more susceptible than those of a human being. Look at a dog, for example. You may go ten miles through a wood to-day, making a thousand turns in every direction, and yet your dog will track you through all those turns and windings to-morrow! A steer, of course, is not proven to have this faculty to this extent, but we may be sure that his capacity in this line is immensely ahead of ours!"

"You are perfectly right, Jim. I would be willing to stake my last dollar!" declared Sam Hooper, earnestly. "This scent, then—this mysterious something—is at the bottom of all our trouble. This scent is brought with the 'Demon Steer,' and it is of course carried away with him. Our cattle pursue, with the idea of overhauling and securing the substance, whatever it is, and in this way they can be run until they're ready to drop with exhaustion!"

"There can be no doubt of the absolute truth of all these suggestions," said Jim. "In a general way, we've got the light for which I have been so long and earnestly seeking. What we want now is to get down to particulars. We must learn what that something is, and just how it is used. Between us, Sam, it will be singular if we do not soon fathom Vann's secrets."

"It will indeed, Jim," returned Sam. "Speaking of secrets, however, it seems to me that Vann may be playing a deeper game than we imagine. You remember, no doubt, who I bought this drove from?"

"Why, from Judge Cawder!"

"True, but we know very little about the judge, and may it not be possible that he is in league with Vann? Is it not possible that the judge and Vann have administered their mysterious drug to all these cattle before I bought them? They may have become addicted to its use before coming into our hands. They may, in fact, have passed as completely under the influence of this mysterious something before I

bought them as any opium-eater has ever passed under the influence of that drug!"

Comanche Jim was startled by the suggestion. What a vista it opened!

How well it harmonized, too, with the deep villainy of Vann's nature!

"All that is not only possible, Sam," he replied, "but it's probable. In fact, Vann may have carried his rascality so far as to slaughter all our steers, as fast as he runs them off, and ship them to market! Who knows?"

CHAPTER XI.

PREPARING FOR BUSINESS!

COMANCHE JIM and his employer were on the right track at last!

Colonel Vann was indeed playing a bigger and more daring game than they had ventured to imagine!"

They had merely begun to get an inkling of his plots and mysteries.

As has already been indicated, he had established himself at Salt Island in a style which seemed to have been patterned after the feudal barons.

There is hardly another such house in the Territory as that of which he had taken possession.

Duly fenced in, toward the north end of the island, were several hundred heads of cattle.

These were merely a blind.

They were simply a cover for his real business.

At the wharf alluded to by Comanche Jim, in his communications to his employer, lay a small stern-wheel steamer, with a very flat bottom, which had evidently been designed to meet the exigencies of the shallow river.

All these things had their uses, as we shall see in due course.

As a simple matter of fact, Colonel Vann was engaged in one of the neatest pieces of piracy which even the variegated villainy of the Great West can offer.

He had not only stampeded thousands of cattle, but he had passed them rapidly through his commodious slaughter-house, and they had turned up in due course upon a distant market, precisely as Comanche Jim has suggested!

It was at Salt Island that he butchered all the cattle he secured by his stampedes north of Fort Sill, or to the northward of the Reservation of the Comanches and Apaches.

He had a smaller establishment of the same sort near Old Camp Augur, on the Red River, which forms, as the reader will remember, the boundary between Texas and Indian Territory, but this latter establishment was supplementary to the other, and had for several weeks been abandoned.

We must now look a little closer into his plans and proceedings.

On leaving Weezy at Bushy Hollow, as related, he hastened to his elegant abode on Salt Island, and gave himself up to rest and refreshment, while he waited for news of the success of his diabolical ambuscade against Sam Hooper and Comanche Jim.

And of course he waited in vain.

After two or three hours of inaction, with good wine and cigars, he began to get uneasy, and took his way to one of the upper rooms of his house, where he bent a long glance down the river and over the adjacent prairies, with the aid of as good a field-glass as money can purchase.

Not seeing anything of Weezy, he sauntered through his spacious drawing-rooms, library, and bedroom, and busied himself at last in his sitting-room by writing several letters and looking over the latest papers.

At length he became so anxious and impatient that he could not fix his thoughts upon either reading or writing.

"Can Hooper have failed to come?" he ejaculated, as he took his way to his south veranda. "Can there have been a hitch in Weezy's performance?"

To his great joy, he saw Weezy himself in the act of crossing the west arm of the river to the island, at the head of his six stalwart ruffians, and hastened to meet him.

But there was no occasion to ask for the news.

The gloomy countenance of Weezy was in itself a sufficient revelation.

"He got away, then?" queried the colonel, as his factotum drew near, and his men took their way to their own quarters.

"He didn't come in the stage, sir," replied Weezy, dismounting.

"How then, curse him?"

"With horses of his own, sir, and an hour or two sooner than expected."

Vann uttered a volley of curses.

"He didn't pass through Bushy Hollow at all, then?"

"No, sir. He didn't even go to Kingfisher Creek Stage Station, but turned off into the prairies soon after passing the Devil's Gap."

"And so you haven't even seen him?"

"No, sir."

A little reflection told Van that his factotum was in no wise responsible for the failure of the ambuscade, and so he refrained from all reproaches.

"Get your dinner," he enjoined briefly, "and then meet me in the steer's stable."

Turning away, the colonel took his way toward a small square building at the back of his stables which was remarkable for being built of brick and for not having a single window.

Several of his men were visible, some of them in the grounds, and others at the slaughter-house and other buildings, but Vann seemed too preoccupied to say anything to them.

Arriving at the massive door of the small square building mentioned, he produced a key and opened it, passing through briskly and closing and locking the door behind him.

Exactly opposite this door was a second one which opened upon the yard with the high stockade of which Comanche Jim had spoken.

By this latter door which was open, sufficient light was shed into the interior of the small square building to show its contents distinctly.

Its sole occupant was a gigantic Texas steer.

The animal was lean and gaunt, as if habitually half-starved, but a model of strength and activity.

It had the wide-spreading, long and slender horns characteristic of Texas cattle, and it would have required no special science for an observer to see that this animal was almost as swift of foot as a horse.

It was chained and padlocked to a manger in which great holes were gnawed, as if the steer had often suffered hunger.

Its color was a light brown, and there did not seem to be a single spot or mark of any kind upon it.

At sight of Vann, the steer stepped about uneasily, rattling its chain, and rolling its eyes excitedly.

"All right, Diablo," said Vann, as he patted the animal's side. "You shall now have something to eat."

He touched a bell-pull, which led away to a room in an adjacent barn, and a couple of red-skins made their appearance, bringing a hot bean mash, which they handed to the colonel.

"You can keep quiet till I want you," he said. "This is all at present."

With a single grunt in unison, the red-skins retired to their quarters, while Vann, drawing a paper from his pocket, emptied into the mass about a gill of a whitish powder, and stirred it in carefully, then placing the mash into the steer's manger.

"There! eat that!" he muttered.

The steer complied with an eagerness which not only attested its hunger, but also suggested that the mash contained some substance of which it was passionately fond.

Looking at his watch, Vann retired as quietly as he had come.

"He'll be ready when I want him," he muttered, with a glance at the sky. "And I am sure to want him to-night!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE STAMPEDERS.

THE afternoon was drawing to a close when the stampeding party left Salt Island, taking its way southward along the west bank of the Cimarron, and for several miles following its general course.

The two red-skins took the lead, one of them being about twenty rods ahead, and the other half that distance, and both maintaining a sharp lookout around them, and occasionally halting to listen.

Then came Colonel Vann, on foot, leading the steer by means of a rope attached to a ring in the animal's nose.

And a few rods behind the colonel came Weezy, leading by their bridles his own horse and that of his employer.

The four men kept under cover as much as possible, and took care to maintain the strictest silence, speaking only in whispers.

All had rifles of the latest model slung across their shoulders, and all carried knives and revolvers.

Their course took them further and further from the river every moment, and at a point about four miles below the mouth of Salt Creek they took leave of it altogether, striking out into the prairies which lie between the Cimarron and the numerous sources of the Kingfisher Creek.

Every step of this journey took them, of course, in the direction of the Hooper Camp.

The dark countenance of Colonel Vann became every moment more and more expressive of malice and desperate energy, and his eyes glared at everything around him as restlessly as those of a hunted wolf.

"Whoa, Diablo!" he suddenly commanded, giving a slight motion to the cord he held.

The animal came to an abrupt halt, becoming as motionless as a stone.

Springing upon the back of the steer, and standing erect, the colonel produced a powerful eye-glass, and bent a careful and comprehensive glance in every direction, and especially in the direction he was going.

From the spot he had reached, which was the crest of one of those buttes peculiar to the great plains, a large stretch of country was visible.

Ere long the wild eyes of Colonel Vann lighted up viciously.

He saw that which he sought.

"Yes, they're there!" he muttered. "Just where they should be! For once everything is in our favor. We shall score a bigger success than ever by this night's operations!"

Seating himself on the bare back of the steer, he made a peculiar gesture to his assistants—one with which they were evidently familiar—and uttered another word of command to his strange mount, which again strode briskly onward.

The route remained a little rough for a few minutes, being pinched and bent by outcrops of rock from adjacent ridges, but it soon became more free and clear, and ere long widened out into a plain.

"Now for it, Diablo!" enjoined Colonel Vann, energetically, as he gave another pull at the cord he held in his hand.

The injunction did not need to be repeated.

With a brisk toss of his head, the steer sprang away at a furious gallop, soon overtaking and passing both of the red-skins, and forcing Weezy to mount one of his horses in order to avoid being left out of sight behind his employer.

At the end of a few minutes the steer was a sight to look upon!

His eyes gleaming, his breath rushing like puffs of steam from his nostrils, and with his ponderous, rolling and tumbling motions, which seemed to shake the ground beneath him, he presented a picture quite as startling and formidable as that of any flying bull bison.

And what a rider was the man upon him!

Now standing erect on the gigantic steer, and shading his eyes with his hands, as he found the rays of the declining sun impeding his vision, and now crouching low upon the animal's back, as he was borne under low hanging limbs or between hedging bushes, he seemed to be as much at his ease on the back of that steer as if he had been swinging in a hammock.

As to guiding the steer, that was a matter that did not present the least trouble.

An occasional "Haw!" or "Gee!" in a sharp, quick voice, was all that was required.

At the end of half an hour the colonel began to slow up, and in due course brought the steer to a walk and slipped to the ground, allowing his red scouts to resume their former relative positions, while Weezy also dismounted, bringing up the rear as before.

After a further long and active march, the foremost red-skin reached the brow of an extensive wooded knoll, from which he could command a view of the plains to the southward and westward, and which was evidently one of the objective points of the expedition.

For here he suddenly came to a halt, looking back, and enjoining secrecy and silence by energetic gestures.

The stampededers were near the scene of their proposed operations.

Even the steer began to manifest a strange excitement and attention, as if conscious that the hour of action was at hand!

CHAPTER XIII.

WEAVING HIS WEB AGAIN.

THE scene under the gaze of the foremost red-skin was the camp of the cowboys.

By the time he had taken a few rapid glances at it, he was joined by his comrade, and the two surveyed it together.

It was scarcely more than a mile distant.

With the aid of good glasses, with which the red scouts were provided, its principal features were plainly visible.

Bartle and his associates were in the act of driving their cattle into the inclosure Comanche Jim had improvised, as related.

Young Hooper and Jim were swinging in hammocks between their tent and the "prairie schooner," and at the same time giving their attention to their surroundings, as could be seen by occasional gestures and movements.

Two or three dogs, at the commands of the cowboys, were worrying as many laggard steers which did not move fast enough toward the quarters prepared for them.

The gaze of the watchers lingered especially upon the grove, with the central opening.

They were discussing it earnestly, in their native tongue, when Colonel Vann, having secured the steer to a tree, drew near them, taking care, as they had done, not to advance beyond the cover of the bushes by which the brow of the bluff was covered.

Noting the object of their remarks, the colonel produced his glass and surveyed as thoroughly as possible the scene before him.

"Yes, there he is, curse him!" he ejaculated, as his gaze lingered upon the face and form of Sam Hooper. "He has escaped the trap set for him! But it will not be for long. It'll be strange if I cannot run him under before he gets out of the Nation!"

He turned to the red-skins, and added:

"You don't think much of that way of rounding up those cattle, do you?"

"It's no good, colonel," answered one of the scouts, the other assenting with nods.

"You can reach them, you think?"

"Yes, sir."

Like half the Indians in the Nation, these two red-skins had always lived among white men, and there was very little in their speech

—when they talked English—to distinguish them from the dominant race.

They were as well dressed, too, as the average of their people.

Both being Cherokees, they had enjoyed unusual facilities for education, and could both read and write; the one thing lacking in both of them was a moral nature.

If they had ever possessed such a characteristic, it had been wholly obliterated by their love of money and whisky.

They had served Colonel Vann ever since his advent into the Territory, he having paid them well, and been indulgent to their drunkenness and other drawbacks.

Being always together, they had been nicknamed Pepper and Salt, and they answered to their names, when addressed by their white associates, as freely as they answered to their native patronymics when addressed by their red brothers.

"You have taken note of everything at the camp, of course?" resumed Vann.

The red-skins assented.

"You see that man in the hammock on the left hand?"

"Yes, sir," answered both in chorus.

"His name is Sam Hooper. He's the owner of all those cattle. No doubt you've heard me speak of him before."

"We saw him in Henrietta, you may remember, sir, when he purchased the drove—"

"Ah, yes," interrupted Vann. "You have not forgotten his features, Pepper?"

"Salt and I never forget the face of a man we are likely to wish to see again," declared Pepper, with a significant smile.

"Exactly. I remember suggesting to you at the time that it might prove useful some day to know Sam Hooper. This man, I will now say frankly is my worst enemy. He loves the same girl I do, and is even engaged to marry her. I used to work for him in Wichita, Kansas—for this man and his father. I was, in fact, their bookkeeper, at a very good salary. This was before I inherited a fortune from one of my aunts. But I needn't bother you with all these details. It is enough to say that I was a little rude to the girl in question because she rejected me, and her people complained of my conduct to the Hoopers. I was sent adrift, and really had to leave the State and find occupation elsewhere."

Pepper and Salt nodded understandingly, displaying more interest than they were wont to manifest for anything outside of their two idols, gold and whisky.

"But I swore to be revenged," pursued Vann, "and the hour is now at hand when this oath can be kept. I expected to be rid of this man to-day. I had seven men waiting at Bushy Hollow to kill him, expecting that he would come by the stage, and take the Kingfisher Trail to reach his camp. But he came another way, and so slipped through my fingers!"

The red-skins again nodded.

"And there he is, as you see," said Vann, with a final glance at the object of his remarks. "Can you kill him to-night in his tent, after the steer has gone home, or during the excitement of the stampede? If so, I will give each of you a hundred dollars in money and a barrel of whisky!"

Vann knew his men, and did not propose to waste his money upon them.

He knew that a hundred dollars would look like a large sum to them, if backed by the quantity named of their favorite beverage.

There was a brief pause, during which Pepper consulted Salt with the eye, as well as in Cherokee, and then the former said:

"There are uncertainties in all things, Colonel Vann, as your Bushy Hollow affair has so well shown you. It's possible that we may not be able to see Sam Hooper between now and morning. We may not even be able to get into his tent unseen. But we'll kill him if we can."

"Good!" exclaimed Vann. "That is all I can expect. I will depend upon you!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE STRANGE STEER.

THE last rays of the sun came shimmering over the scene at this moment.

The sky was beginning to darken, and the night already promised to be stormy, as could have been seen by a glance at the skurrying clouds which mottled the face of the heavens.

A fierce, gusty wind was sighing in the tree-tops, coming from northwest by north.

This was exactly the direction of Salt Island from the camp of the cowboys, and the dark eyes of John Vann glowed wickedly as he noted this circumstance.

"We had better lay out our course," he continued, after a pause. "You see those four large cottonwoods north of the grove?"

"We see them, sir," replied Pepper.

"I shall lead the steer as straight as possible to those trees, and let him loose there."

The scouts bowed understandingly.

"With this wind," pursued Vann, as he held his hand up to it, "I can readily keep at the distance indicated. There's no necessity of allowing Diablo or myself to be seen from the camp."

"Not the least, sir," declared Salt.

"You will take good care," added the colonel, "to see that no one is lounging about the line of my advance, or if there is you will give me timely warning. The other essential for to-night is to cut the ropes which have been run around the grove, and so give the cattle a chance to run."

"We comprehend just what we have to do, colonel," assuaged Pepper, "and will not fail to do it."

"You have laid out the route by which you will reach the camp, of course?"

"Of course," answered Pepper.

"And also that by which you will leave it?"

The couple smilingly assented.

They had never yet trusted themselves in any dangerous place without having a clear idea of the way out of it.

"You know every foot of the ground between here and the river?"

Once more the scouts acquiesced, and the colonel restored his glass to his pocket.

"The darkness bids fair to be just what we want," he said, as he noted how rapidly the shadows of the coming night were gathering around him. "The wind is just strong enough to carry the scent promptly from the steer to the drove, and it blows from the right quarter to keep the cattle constantly under the influence of the scent until they reach the island. There will be no moon, not even starlight. There'll be rain later, but we'll not wait for it. I'm going to act as soon as the night has fully set in. We may as well complete our preparations. Come."

The colonel led the way back to the steer, near which stood Weezy, who had hitched his horses to an adjacent pine.

"I have laid out my route, Weezy," said Vann, "and shall let Diablo loose at the four cottonwoods of which we were speaking this morning when discussing the proposed stampede. You'll accordingly have the horses in readiness at the bend of that water-course which lies directly between here and there."

"I've just been looking up my route, sir, both to go and come," answered Weezy, "and will not fail to be at the spot indicated at the right moment."

"Then we'll consider that settled."

Looking toward a ravine at no great distance from the bluff, the colonel uttered a peculiar cry, which might have readily been mistaken for one of the calls of a night-hawk quite common in the Territory.

Then he listened, as did those with him.

At the end of a few moments came an answering cry precisely like that Vann had uttered.

"Jed is there," muttered Vann, his face brightening. "Come, Weezy."

With a few words of warning and suggestion to his red-skins, the colonel unhitched his steer and led him down the back slope of the bluff, following a route with which he had evidently become familiar.

Arriving at the ravine, where there was a small open space, the colonel found himself in the presence of another of his confidential ruffians, a half-breed, who answered to the name of Jedediah. Behind him stood a horse hitched to a box-wagon in which was a great variety of parcels and boxes, and even barrels.

It was now getting quite dark, especially in the ravine, which lay in the shadow of many immense trees.

"You got here without being seen, Jed?" was the first question of Vann, as he proceeded to hitch the steer anew to a tree.

"I did, sir."

"And you've seen no sign of any one since?"

"Not till you came, sir."

The colonel turned to Weezy.

"You had better hand out the stove," he said. "Diablo must have his dose."

Weezy took from the wagon a small alcohol stove, or heater, with powerful funnels, and stood it upon a flat stone occupying a central position in the glen, applying a burning match to the wicks.

A flame instantly appeared, and Weezy placed upon the heater a kettle containing a preparation which looked like the wash Diablo had eaten at the island.

It was astonishing to see what quick attention the animal gave to these proceedings.

He stepped about as uneasily as if he had been standing upon live coals, turning his head from side to side, looking from Weezy to the colonel, and staring fixedly at the fire and the kettle.

His eagerness to get at the "dose" in preparation for him was strange enough, and can be compared only with the tremulous anxiety of an opium-eater to secure a long-delayed morsel of his favorite drug.

"You may take a turn around us, Jed," said the colonel to the half-breed, "to be sure that no one is watching us."

As Jed withdrew, vanishing into the heavy shadows which now enveloped the scene, Colonel Vann added a handful of brownish flour to the contents of the kettle, stirring it in briskly, and then emptied the kettle into a low-sided, heavy oaken tub he produced from the wagon.

"Here it is, Diablo," he said, placing the tub under the steer's nose. "And now be quiet."

The animal began eating greedily, while the colonel hastened to place upon the heater another kettle he had taken from the wagon.

"Stir this, Weezy," he enjoined, indicating the liquid in the kettle, "until it is too hot to bear your hand in."

Weezy hastened to comply.

While he was thus employed, the colonel took from the wagon a sort of quilt, very large, thick and heavy, and placed it upon the steer, securing it in place with stout bands and cords, provided for that purpose.

This quilt enveloped the steer to the knees, it having pendants at the sides and four corners, with strings, to cover the thighs and legs of the animal as completely as possible.

The quilt having been adjusted to his satisfaction, the colonel next fastened upon the steer a triple chain armor, of the most beautiful and efficient workmanship, it being composed of small, half-spiral links of steel chain, all knitted together as closely as such materials can be woven.

It was a marvel of elasticity and strength, without being too heavy, and was of the same shape and size as the quilt, which it covered completely.

This chain armor was soon secured firmly to the steer by the fastenings attached to it, the quilt under it forming a soft cushion or bed for it.

And finally came a second quilt, of the same size and shape as the first, but of a dark color, which was firmly secured over the chain armor, concealing it completely.

These coverings increased the steer's apparent bulk notably, but not more than a natural increase of fat and flesh would have done, so that there was nothing at all remarkable about the animal's appearance, particularly when seen in such darkness as now reigned around him.

But of course it was disguised by these trappings, so that even one familiar with his appearance in the stable would not now have known him.

"Ready, sir," announced Weezy, as he removed the kettle from the heater, extinguishing the latter and restoring it to the wagon.

Colonel Vann tested the heat of the liquid with his fingers, and then took the kettle in one hand and a sponge in the other, proceeding to apply the liquid to the coverings of the steer until the entire contents of the kettle had been absorbed.

Only a slight odor was noticeable while the colonel was applying the liquid, but later—either because of chemicals in the quilts, or because of slow action of the combinations involved in the materials themselves—the steer began to literally reek with a strange and peculiar odor, pungent and volatile, at the same time becoming as uneasy as a fish out of water.

"He's ripe now," muttered Vann, with a satisfied smile, as he returned the kettle to the wagon. "Here comes Jed. Let him leave for home as rapidly as he can without making too much noise."

The half-breed was duly dismissed by Weezy, and master and man waited until he was clear of the ravine.

By this time the steer had licked his tub clean, and had become strangely restless and excited.

Taking charge of him, Colonel Vann led the way to the spot where he had left his horses and the red-skins.

"You have your flies?" he said to the latter.

Both assented.

"Then see what time it is."

These "flies" were merely tiny glass vials, containing a sort of glow-worm endowed with so much phosphorescence that they readily furnished light enough to read the address of a letter, or to note the position of the hands of a watch.

Producing a cheap timekeeper with one hand and a "fly" with the other, Peppen announced that the time was ten minutes to nine o'clock.

"Then arrange to be through at the camp in half an hour from now, and I will govern my movements accordingly. This is time enough for you?"

"Just right, sir," answered Pepper. "Or, if there should be any hitch, I'll intercept you between here and the four cottonwoods."

"Then be off."

The red-skins nodded an assent, which was also a leave-taking, and crept away through the bushes, descending as directly as possible from the bluff to the prairie.

"You will bring up the rear, with the horses, Weezy, as ordered," said Vann. "I will look for you, thirty minutes hence, at the bend indicated."

And with this Vann began descending the bluff, taking a firm hold of the ring in the nose of the steer, which was becoming more and more uneasy and excited every moment, as if keenly alive to the task devolving upon him!

CHAPTER XV.

ON THE WATCH.

WHILE these events were transpiring, Sam and Jim had not been idle.

After rounding up for the night, the cowboys

all assembled at the tent, at the special invitation of their employer.

The young cattle-dealer not only desired to make the acquaintance of the new men—Crossman and Jenkins, recently of Fort Reno—but to renew his pleasant relations with the rest.

He not only desired to give them all a hint of the dangers menacing the camp, but he also wished to get every one's opinion in regard to the stampede and stampedeers, and pick up such facts and suggestions as any of them might have to offer.

An excellent supper was promptly furnished by Filkins, who also kindly undertook to keep "watch and ward" over the camp while all the rest did justice to his zeal and skill in his especial department.

There was a constant flow of conversation during the time occupied by the repast, but it savored rather of recreation and pleasure than of business.

It was not difficult for Sam to find time to exchange a few words with all his employees, including the new cowboys, and he was delighted to reach a prompt conclusion that they were all as honest and loyal as they were brave and efficient.

The repast ended, a box of fine cigars was produced and passed around, and every man in the gathering addicted to this species of indulgence was soon adding his quota to the cloud of smoke floating up toward the roof-pole.

Seeing that it was not yet dark, the young cattle-dealer pressed the entire party to remain a few minutes longer, remarking that he had a little information to impart, and was not without hopes of receiving some from them.

"It seems that we are the prey of a gang of stampedeers," he said—"of men who have run off about half the drove, and are in a fair way to run off the rest. Now, let it be understood, my friends, that I shall not be discouraged if we do not get a single steer of this drove into Kansas, and that I am not in the least disturbed by past or prospective losses. If we lose all these cattle, we shall take a new start and endeavor to deserve better luck."

This preamble met with the heartiest approval, expressing perfectly the sentiments of the cowboys.

"But what does disturb me," added Sam, "is the immunity with which these stampedeers have made their raids upon us. What is the secret of their success, Hammick?"

He addressed the oldest man in the group—a broken-down miner, but a man of good heart and sense.

"I think, sir," answered Hammick, promptly, "that these cattle have all been wonted with some drug, like opium, before you bought them."

"But opium is six or eight dollars a pound," objected Sam, smilingly, "so that the drug cannot be anything like that."

"Not in price—no, sir; but there are weeds and poisons growing all over Texas, which can be had for the digging, and which might be even more effective to make a beast lose its head than opium is for a man!"

"It would have to be a pretty bad dose, then," rejoined Sam. "But what you say is perfectly just, Hammick. It's easy to comprehend that these cattle may have been infatuated with some drug before leaving Henrietta. I am all the more struck by what you say, Hammick, for the reason that Jim and I were speaking of this very possibility a few hours ago. Let us take it for granted that what you suggest has really taken place. What next?"

"Why, the next thing is to give the cattle a sniff of their favorite weed, and they'll go for it instantly, just as I have walked seven miles in mud knee-deep to get a paper of tobacco!"

There was a general laugh at this comparison, but it was easy to see that the suggestions of Hammick commanded the serious respect of all present.

"Do you mean to say?" queried Sam, "that a steer can be as unreasonable as a man?"

"Why not, sir?" returned Hammick. "I have seen cattle run at full gallop to overtake a boy carrying a few quarts of salt. In a word, they can become as addicted to the use of some particular weed as a drunkard to the use of liquor, and with the same results, namely: that they are crazy to get it."

"Well, well, Hammick, you are making out a good case," commented Sam. "What's your next point?"

"Why, we now come to this 'Demon Stampeder.' That creature has been trained to go home as soon as he is let loose, no matter where he is, or how far away he is. That steer has been trained to go home as naturally as a dog or a carrier-pigeon. Of course, he has been starved and beaten and half-murdered, to bring him up to this point, but he has none the less learned to do just what is expected of him, like your trained dogs, performing elephants, or what not. Well, this steer, after being fairly soaked in that drug or wash, whatever it is, is led up near our drove, to windward, and his scent comes down upon our cattle, absolutely driving them out of their senses."

A profound silence succeeded, accompanied by a general exchange of glances.

There was not a single man present who did not regard the suggestions of Hammick with as much respect as favor.

"I've only one word more to say," continued Hammick, "and that is that the 'Demon Steer,' is probably covered with some sort of armor. If not, how does it happen that he has been shot at repeatedly, and yet keeps turning up as if nothing had happened?"

"True, Hammick," said Sam. "But what sort of an armor is the steer likely to have?"

"Why, he can only have a chain armor, or one that is flexible," replied Hammick. "There is a kind of chain armor which is called 'cupped and twisted.' This kind is so constructed that it does not present a flat surface at any point, and a ball striking it from any quarter is sure to be deflected, or given a slant. The word 'cupped,' in this connection, means that the links of the chain armor are put together in such a way that a pressure upon any one link is transmitted to a number of those around it, thus associating every link with a group, and making the armor ten times stronger than it could possibly be made by any other method of construction."

"And you really think this steer wears such an armor as you describe, Hammick?" asked Sam.

"I have no doubt of it, sir, none whatever!"

"In that case, we shall waste our ammunition upon it!"

"For the present—yes, sir. A ball from one of our rifles can have no other effect upon the steer, so long as his armor is whole, than to expedite his movements. But repeated shots will at length beat a way through this protection, and we shall have him!"

"I'd sooner have him without waiting so long, or having any more trouble from him," declared Sam. "As a means to this end, let me tell you who owns and runs this steer, and what sort of a lookout we have before us."

Sam's tale was soon told, and it led to various comments and suggestions, but the cowboys seemed to think that it was the business of their employer to take such action in the premises as he thought proper, it being understood that they would second his plans or efforts in every possible way and manner.

"Well, then," said he, "as it's now getting dark, let's leave Filkins in charge of the tent, and all the rest of us will go on guard, with our rifles, and see if we cannot prevent Colonel Vann and his men from running off any more of our cattle!"

The proposal was hailed with pleasure, and every man present was speedily assigned a post and took his departure, Sam and Jim being the last to quit the tent, as they had waited for the return of Filkins.

"And now for a hint as to my course, Sam," said Comanche Jim, as he and his employer strode toward their improvised corral. "You remember those four cottonwoods to the southward of the grove?"

Sam nodded assent.

"Well, I propose to mount one of them," pursued Jim, "and stow myself away among its leaves and branches. If any attempt is made to stampede our stock to-night, it will doubtless be made from that point, as the wind is north, and in that case I shall be well located to give any intruder a taste of bullets!"

"A capital idea, Jim!"

This approbation was enough for the young executive of the camp, and he was soon stowed away in the nook indicated—in one of the very trees near which Colonel Vann had arranged to turn loose the "Demon Steer!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE STAMPEDE!

THE night had fully set in when Colonel Vann, leading his steer, set out upon his nefarious mission.

He had his reasons, of course, for taking such an early start.

These reasons were many, but they can be substantially indicated by two.

In the first place, he desired the stolen cattle to arrive at Salt Island at such an early hour as to render their slaughter and shipment during the night a possible and even easy performance.

And in the second place, he had learned from long experience that the best hour for stampeding a drove of cattle is between day and night, or early in the evening, before they have lain down, or reached that state of feeling where the fatigues of the day become blended with the drowsiness so natural to-night.

It is scarcely necessary to remark that this course had its obvious disadvantages, but Colonel Vann felt none the less inclined to incur them.

As early as was the hour, the silence from around him was intense, as he thus descended from the bluff to the prairie.

Both wood and prairie were alive, of course, with all those endless chirps and calls which characterize the insect world, but man and his works had ceased to be prominent.

At the camp of Sam Hooper and his friends there was a faint gleam of light, doubtless that of a candle or two, which seemed barely able to struggle through the walls of the tent.

Reaching the general level of the prairie, and at the same time emerging from the bushes which had helped to conceal his presence, the colonel slowly came to a halt, checking the progress of the steer by a series of quiet but energetic jerks of the ring in the animal's nose.

How intently he looked!

How breathlessly he listened!

And not alone!

The steer had almost as much the air of a prowling marauder as himself!

Motionless, its head thrown high into the air, its eyes gleaming, it seemed quite as watchful and cautious as its master.

It had, too, a strange air of secrecy and quiet, as if half-conscious of the contraband nature of its performances.

Despite its deep agitation and excitement, a slight pressure of the ring in its nose caused it to stand as still as a lamb.

Holding his hand high above his head, with its fingers spread out, Colonel Vann tested anew the force and direction of the wind.

"It's the same," he muttered.

And with this man and steer resumed progress.

As dark as it had now become, the colonel did not have the least hesitation about his course or his footing.

As a matter of fact, he had taken his bearings by compass, with the bluff, the tent and the four cottonwoods as the points of his triangulation, and all he had now to do, to be absolutely sure of his course, was to produce from time to time his pocket compass and a "fly" like that used earlier by Pepper.

By this process, he experienced very few deviations, and these were promptly corrected.

Now and then he halted, of course, renewing his listening and his searching survey of his surroundings.

At length, at one of these halts, he drew from one of his pockets a handful of the brownish flour he had previously made use of, and allowed the steer to eat it from his hands.

This the steer did greedily.

And with strange effects, too, for it seemed to instantly experience a marked accession of strength, excitement, and restlessness.

It was just such an effect, in fact, as is seen in the human frame, when an inveterate drinker swallows the dram for which he has been long and anxiously waiting!

At every hundred yards, or so, the man and steer continued to make their pauses, and at each and all of them this dosing was repeated, with the result that the steer became more and more excited, eager, and restless.

This species of drunkenness—for it was nothing else—at length became so pronounced that it was no easy matter for Vann to hold and guide his four-footed associate.

It was only because of the immense advantage assured him by that ring in the animal's nose that he was able to so easily maintain its subjection to his wishes and intentions.

On and on went man and steer, still enveloped in that dense gloom, and still maintaining that profound silence.

Of course Vann was in no hurry.

He had allowed himself half an hour for that journey of a mile.

Thanks to his long experience, he was able to time himself in such a way as to assure his success in every direction.

Not only was he making the desired progress, but the strange odor with which he had endowed the steer was being developed to just the right degree of intensity.

How much the exertions of the steer, with its consequent perspiration and animal heat, were involved in these events, we cannot undertake to say, but they were none the less incontestable.

The animal now literally reeked with the mixture which had been applied to its coverings, dissipating around it one of the most singular and pungent of odors, and at the same time one of the most subtle, or one that readily entered into the air's circulation, and quickly became diffused to a distance.

Walking so close to the steer, which he held with his right hand, and which was consequently to the windward of him, the colonel got the full force of this odor, and was able to keep himself informed of its growing intensity.

After a few critical sniffs of it, he chuckled with suppressed jubilation.

"He's ripe!" he breathed.

The wind continuing to blow with the same force from the same quarter, the odor from this strange source was constantly caught up by it and borne swiftly to leeward.

Man and steer were now getting abreast of the improvised corral of Sam's cattle.

Assuring himself of his precise whereabouts, by another reference to his compass, with the aid of his "fly," Vann again chuckled.

His face had become as smiling as that of a smiling demon.

"They'll soon take the scent!" he thought.

Halting again, he glanced at his watch, awaiting himself anew of the light of his "fly."

Twenty minutes of his half-hour were exhausted.

Satisfied with all the facts of his situation and surroundings, he went on slowly, with frequent

halts, looking and listening more intently than ever.

Not having heard from his red-skins, either personally or by signal, he knew that they were making a success of their mission.

He would have been willing to stake his life that both had reached the grove unseen, and were now in the midst of Sam's cattle.

Not merely to wait, but to act.

For they, too, were factors in the stampede.

They had their pockets filled with the brownish flour we have seen in use, and were already feeding it to the cattle, darting here and there among them, and awakening the susceptibilities of the whole drove.

At length Vann looked at his watch again.

Twenty-five minutes had elapsed since his departure from the bluff.

He was now at the crisis of the undertaking!

The rest must be quickly accomplished.

The outlines of the four cottonwoods were now visible at no great distance ahead of him.

He had traversed the whole front of the grove.

The strange odor of Diablo must have already reached the cattle.

"Ah, yes!"

The trampling and pushing which had been developed at the grove during the last few minutes, and constantly widening and deepening, now became audible to both man and steer.

The corral was in a ferment.

Every head was tossed high into the air.

Excited snortings and bellowings resounded.

Then that restless surging and trampling became an uproar that defies description.

And now wild cries of alarm, wonder, and command came from the watching cowboys, and reports of rifles and revolvers rung over the prairie, while a dark mass of raging cattle burst from the grove!

The stampede was begun!

CHAPTER XVII.

COMANCHE JIM'S RIDE.

By this time Colonel Vann had reached the four cottonwoods, despite the trouble now given him by the steer, which seemed to have become frantic.

Now was his time to get rid of the animal and secure his own safety by beating a hasty retreat to the spot where Weezy was waiting with the horses.

Suddenly drawing from a breast-pocket a silver harpoon ten inches in length, and with two inches of spread in the points, he plunged it into the neck of the steer, in such a way as to leave it fast, at the same time setting the animal free by withdrawing the ring from its nose.

And then Vann sprung away in the direction of his horses, with a speed that would hardly have been expected of him.

Two or three times the steer turned on itself, as on a pivot, shaking its head violently, with the evident intention of dislodging the instrument which had been planted in its neck, but it seemed to realize promptly the uselessness of these efforts, ceasing to rotate, while it pawed the ground, and uttered a low, but scared sort of below.

At this instant a shot resounded, and the steer gave a jump, as if a bullet had stung it, and again shook its head and turned upon itself, as if dazed and bewildered.

This shot had been fired by Comanche Jim, from the tree in which he had taken refuge, as related.

Jim had seen both man and steer approaching but at that moment such a startling uproar had reached him from the grove that he could do no less than bestow his principal attention in that quarter.

When he at length turned to give his attention to the colonel, that personage was already vanishing from the scene too rapidly to offer a satisfactory mark in such darkness as now covered the prairie.

As between man and steer, however, Jim would have given his first shot to the latter. He accordingly took good aim at the animal and fired, with the result stated.

Astonished and disgusted, Jim gave the steer a second shot, without other result than another sudden jump on the part of the animal.

By this time, as was natural, Jim began to get hot-headed. Remarking that the animal was directly under the limb on which he had taken refuge, he dropped upon its back, rifle in hand, and uttered a yell that would have startled even a member of that race from which he had borrowed his patronymic.

If the steer had had doubts about its course until that moment, it had them no longer.

Away he went at a pace only good horses can equal.

And not an instant too soon; for close behind him came that host of raging cattle which had burst from the grove—an awful sea of heads and horns, rising and falling, in terrific plunges, like the wildest waves of a tempest!

One glance—and Jim wished himself back in the cottonwood.

It was an awful sensation to realize that he and the steer he had mounted formed the opening tooth in that living harrow!

But it was something to see that the "Demen

Steer" was worthy of his reputation, as a leader of such hordes.

He got away with the double liveliness of pain and terror—of pain, with that cruel cut in his neck;—of terror, at his rider.

His motions were at once so lively and rough that Jim involuntarily closed his legs and fingers upon what happened to be beneath him.

To do this, was to discover that his steer had had been peculiarly equipped for its journeys.

His hand, in fact, had come in contact with a substance which even a blind man could not have mistaken. This was the quilt covering the steer's chain armor.

But that was not all that struck Jim's attention. The quilt was at once greasy and sticky, as the result of the strange mixture Colonel Vann had poured over it.

There was also something beneath it which rattled and clashed in a most mysterious manner.

After what Hammick had said about chain armor, Jim did not doubt for a moment the nature of the metallic mantle beneath him.

The only wonder was that the movements of the steer did not cause the links and joints of his covering to rattle still louder.

But the mystery did not escape him.

By leaning forward and feeling under the animal's throat he readily assured himself of the existence of the quilt in which the armor was imbedded.

As everything his herds encountered were saturated with the greasy and sticky substance he had so promptly noticed, he was not slow to draw the inevitable conclusions.

If he had had any doubts as to why it was there, he would have only needed to smell of his hands to be enlightened.

He realized that this was the source of the scent the cattle were following!

At the terrific gait at which the steer was going—directly against the wind, too—Jim was not greatly inconvenienced by this strange odor, but he realized that it would be almost suffocating if he had happened to be going with the wind.

A general idea having thus been acquired of his situation, Jim looked around to see what was taking place at the camp. To his surprise, it was already wholly out of sight behind him! The light he had seen from the cottonwood was no longer visible!

As for the grove where the cattle had been corralled, its very outlines had vanished!

His next thought was of Bartle and the rest of the cowboys, and he looked at each side of the route as well as behind, to see if they were making any attempt to stem that living torrent, but not a sign of them was seen.

And now a sudden tremor shook the soul of Comanche Jim. He was compelled to realize that his weight, in addition to that of the chain armor, was seriously handicapping the steer he was riding.

He had only to look behind him, to the left and right, to see that the horns of that terrible crescent of living cattle were slowly but surely coming to the front, and threatening to envelop him.

As he realized that fact, he faced about upon the steer, firing his rifle into the pursuing cattle until his cartridges were exhausted, and at the same time yelling and gesticulating, with all the force of his lungs and muscles.

Vain and puny efforts!

He could not see that his shots and shouts had the least effect upon the cattle!

He did not even cause them to waver or hesitate for a moment!

And on they came—on and on—more terrific of mien and action than ever, until the horns of that living crescent seemed to bend around him, as if to embrace him in their deadly trampling!

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOW IT HAD BEEN DONE.

How the stampede had attained their end, requires a passing mention.

As we have seen by his arrangements with Pepper and Salt, his two Cherokees, Colonel Vann had reduced the business to a science. Every movement was timed, every difficulty foreseen and provided for.

Notwithstanding the distance between him and his red-skins; notwithstanding the darkness, they all worked as one man at the moment of executing their respective tasks—as well, in fact, as if a telephone had been in use between them.

As they drew near the grove where the cattle of Sam Hooper were corralled, the two red-skins found the cowboys on watch, precisely as expected.

Mounted, and armed with rifles, the defenders of the camp were in possession of their several posts, as alert as the danger could make them.

Bartle had assumed the general direction of the defense, leaving the young cattle-dealer to take a much-needed repose in the tent, as was natural after the firesome ride of the preceding night, and old Filkins, the cook, was on guard in that quarter.

The intention of Bartle and his associates had been to hedge the camp in as with a wall of fire.

Instead of being scared out, however, by this

display of activity, the red-skins merely uttered a contemptuous and silent grunt far down in their throats.

What they saw was mere child's play for these crafty sons of the forest.

The horses of the cowboys being almost constantly in motion, even when they were standing still—as an Irishman would say—the result was a constant noise which was quite sufficient to cover the movements of even clumsier enemies than the two Cherokees.

Without saying a word about the noise caused by the cattle, therefore, it is perfectly easy to realize that the red-skins experienced as little trouble as danger, in taking their way toward the scene of their proposed operations.

As regards all other questions and considerations, they were amply covered by the profound darkness.

The red-skins accordingly crept nearer and nearer, until they were close to the grove.

Their every movement displayed a deadly purpose.

Each had a knife in his belt, and carried a revolver in his hand.

They were as ready to kill as to run.

For a few minutes they waited and watched behind such bushes and other obstructions as came in their way.

Their hearing had been trained to such a point that they could tell their surroundings almost as well by ear as by sight.

Every stir near them, even if beyond their gaze, was carefully investigated by their hearing.

Every movement of the cowboys on the side of the camp by which the intruders had approached was followed from its opening to its close.

Of course Bartle and his friends were not unmindful of the disadvantages under which they were laboring.

They had even thought of leaving their horses behind them, and concealing themselves in perfect quietude and silence in the prairie just outside of the grove.

But this line of conduct was rejected as being inadequate in several particulars.

Among other reasons for doing as they did, it was essential to remain mounted, so as to be in readiness to pursue and turn back the cattle, in case of a stampede—the one danger against which all measures were directed.

If the cowboys had found it almost impossible to prevent quite a body of cattle from following the decoy steer, they had none the less discovered that they could check the great mass of the drove by prompt and resolute action, and this was naturally a consideration that, primed all others.

The moment the decoy steer had commenced his retreat, that moment his influence upon the drove began to lessen, as every step of distance weakened the fascination of which he was the center.

The cowboys had noticed, too, that the line of demarcation between the cattle which fled and those which were startled and dazed, or merely inclined to flee, was one that quickly presented itself, in ordinary circumstances, and one that only required prompt action to be firmly and finally established.

After a long and close survey of the scene before them, the two red-skins looked at their time-pieces, with the aid of their "fire-flies," and comprehended that the moment was at hand for the scent from the steer to reach the cattle.

The next instant, with the first sniff of the tempting odor, the nearest cattle began to move uneasily, lifting their heads, and in various ways manifesting their awakened attention.

The red-skins exchanged gestures of rejoicing.

"What's that?" asked Bartle, of the cowboy nearest him, as both looked toward that point of the grove where this commotion had manifested itself.

"Can't say, I'm sure," was the answer. "I've seen nothing—heard nothing."

For the moment the attention of the two men was fixed upon the point indicated.

This was a moment of which the red-skins availed themselves on all similar occasions.

Slipping into the grove as noiselessly as promptly, they began administering to the cattle they encountered the tempting doses they carried in their pockets.

Of course the agitation of the drove widened and deepened rapidly under this double incitation—that of the steer and that of the red-skins—and in a very few moments a strange, deep excitement was running along the front of the cattle as a prairie fire runs over a sea of parched and withered grass!

"There's something wrong there!" cried Bartle, excitedly. "See or hear anything, Crossman?"

"Not a thing!"

"Or smell anything unusual?"

"Nothing."

Naturally not!

The scent of the decoy, as it was borne across the front of the grove, was instantly so widely dissipated that it is doubtful if any of the cowboys were adequate to detect it.

At the same time, this scent was as evident to the cattle as the odor of a tumbler of whisky to an inveterate toper!

Another moment, and the whole northern edge of the drove was in a ferment.

The red-skins did not need to note the hour again to know that Colonel Vann was near the four cottonwoods and about to turn loose the decoy.

The very actions of the cattle, like their glances, were enough to tell the red-skins in what quarter were the colonel and the steer at that moment.

Gliding among the cattle, with which they kept themselves constantly covered, the two Cherokees cut the encircling ropes in a number of places.

Then each selected a steer, not merely to serve as a decoy, but also as a moving shield, under cover of which to beat a retreat.

Suddenly producing five-pronged hooks, fashioned much like a bird's claw, the red-skins struck their sharp points through the hides and deep into the flesh of the steers in question.

Of course the animals bounded with pain and fright, and the next instant were being rushed toward the cottonwoods, each dragging beside it a red-skin, whose weight upon the instrument of torture sufficed to render the creature frantic.

Instant pursuit was made by the cowboys, who fired several shots, shooting down two or three steers, including one of those behind which skulked the red-skins, but these efforts did not prevent the stampede, and in another moment several hundred head of cattle were in motion, the whole northern edge of the drove sloughing off from the rest as suddenly as an avalanche descends the side of the mountain!

And this is how the stampede was accomplished.

CHAPTER XIX.

WHERE JIM FETCHED UP.

As was natural, Comanche Jim realized only too keenly the situation in which he found himself.

But, however disagreeable it was, he was forced to endure it.

To jump from the back of the steer, or to be thrown from it, would be instant death.

The mass of raging cattle behind him would trample over him as over a feather, taking no account of him whatever.

It is a peculiarity of a stampede that, however slight or trying the original cause of it may have been, it is almost certain to assume formidable proportions before it can be got under.

In this respect cattle are like men.

They can as readily as men become the victims to a panic.

The very noise they make in running seems quite sufficient to endow them with terror.

It is as if every steer became a wonder and horror of his companions.

The first requisite in Jim's case, therefore, was to *hold on*, and this, thanks to his thorough horsemanship, was not a difficult matter.

He realized that he was "in for it!"

He could not hope to take leave of his violently tossed ship until it had reached some sort of a port.

In other terms, until the cattle had had their run, and reached their destination.

Making a virtue of this necessity, he continued to watch the scene in which he was figuring, as the cattle continued their wild career northward.

Two facts, both of which were favorable to him, soon arrested his attention.

The first related to the horns of that living crescent of which he was the center.

The more these horns pulled to the front, the more the cattle composing them lost the scent, and seemed to become puzzled and uncertain, with a consequent diminishing of speed.

The second related to the steer he was riding.

The nearer the pursuing cattle came to him the faster became his flight.

In fact, it was soon apparent that he possessed a reserve of strength and endurance for which Jim had not at first given him credit.

He not only held his own, after the first fierce rush, but began to draw ahead.

The explanation of this circumstance will readily occur to the reader.

The strange steer was used to it.

He had been in that particular line of business many a time and often.

It was just here that his unusual size and force stood him in good stead.

Very slowly indeed, but none the less surely, the strange steer pulled to the front.

The cattle immediately behind him, inspired and excited by the strong odor of the drugs, or drug, with which he was reeking, did not fail to keep near him, at the same time that the horns of the living crescent fell to the rear, thus straightening the front of the cattle, and at length fell behind.

In this way, the shape of the flying drove underwent a notable change in the course of a very few minutes.

From being opened like a crescent, it slowly took upon itself the shape of a triangle or that of a flock of geese in flight, or that of an old-fashioned three-sided harrow, with the steer

at the front, or as the apex of the moving column.

This change was regarded by Comanche Jim as a change for the better.

He began to hope that his mount would eventually pull clear of his embarrassing escort.

How many cattle had been stampeded?

As dark as was the night, and as rapidly as he was moving, he made an effort to arrive at some definite conclusion on this subject.

At the moment of descending a long slope, with water-courses on each side, which were shut in by the usual fringes of trees, and with the crest of an undulation behind, he was able to add the resources of hearing to those of sight, and to form some estimate of the number of cattle by which the steer was accompanied.

He was sure that they could not be less than three hundred and fifty.

As they formed a compact body, instead of being scattered widely over the prairie, he realized that his friends at the camp had made a success of their efforts, and had intercepted and turned back the great bulk of the drove, coming between it and the fugitives, or those which had been especially subjected to the influence of the stampede.

And these three hundred and fifty?

Would they never stop running?

So far as Jim could see, they were as wild and excited as ever.

They gave no sign of getting tired or of recovering their lost calmness.

Jim realized that this persistence did not come from any pursuit, as he knew the cowboys had all they could do to retain the cattle still in their hands, without giving a thought or a single step to those which had made good their escape.

By this time the strange steer and his following were at least six miles from camp.

In other words they were nearly half way to the Cimarron from their starting-point.

How long would this wild journey continue?

As he asked himself this question, Jim remembered what Hammick had said on the subject, and to do this was to have his answer.

The steer had doubtless been trained to keep moving until he reached his stable.

Trained, in the style of a carrier-pigeon, as Hammick had suggested.

No doubt he was in a half-famished condition, and absorbed in some keen perception of the supper that would be served to him, on his arrival, as a reward of his well-doing!

Without being actually posted as to the *modus operandi* employed by Colonel Vann in the premises, it was easy to realize that the stomach of the animal entered largely into the strange game the stampede was playing.

Jim realized, therefore, that he would probably be carried as far as Salt Island, and resigned himself to his destiny.

If the fact was eminently disagreeable, it was certainly far from being as bad as the facts might have readily been.

For instance, it was a great point in his favor that he had not been obliged to traverse a piece of woods.

Three or four times, in crossing a "draw," or creek, he had received a severe brushing from limbs and bushes, and realized keenly the disaster that would have been liable to overtake him if the country traversed had been less open.

Then, too, if he were carried to Salt Island, even that fact might be turned to account.

Might he not be able to observe for himself, from a near point of view, just what was taking place in that quarter?

The more he reflected upon this prospect, the more it appealed to his love of adventure, and the more it soothed the wrath he had naturally experienced at Colonel Vann's proceedings.

He resolved to "spy out the land!"

Clearly enough, he could not take leave of the steer under existing circumstances.

The gap between him and the pursuing cattle was not wide enough for him to escape by a sudden flank movement.

He would infallibly be run down in any such attempt, and all the more readily because he had thrown away his rifle, as useless, after exhausting his ammunition.

Busy with these reflections and recognitions, he at length reached the immediate valley of the Cimarron, arriving within a mile of the river.

And now a chorus of yells suddenly resounded behind him and beside him!

A glance around, as the strange steer quickened its pace, and Jim realized the situation.

The cowboys of Colonel Vann, his butchers, and all his assistants, were in waiting to receive the stampeded cattle, and run them across the west arm of the river to the island.

These were nearly a score in number.

They were all well mounted upon fresh horses, and were supplied with torches.

Taking charge of the stampeded cattle, they proceeded, with flaming torches and loud cries to concentrate and direct them toward the ford.

Jim saw that the light of the blazing torches now encircling the drove was sufficient to reveal his presence, but there was no help for it.

In fact, he had little time to think about his situation, and no chance to change it.

The strange steer appeared to realize that he was upon the home-stretch, and to go faster than ever.

It seemed but a few moments, therefore, before he reached the river and dashed into it, leading the way across the ford to the island, and making a final break for his stable.

Either because the animal had quickened his speed at the last moment, or because the stampeded cattle had hesitated at the ford or been distracted and confused by the lights and noises around them—or for both of these reasons—the steer had now distanced all his pursuers, and was rapidly enlarging the gap behind him.

Comanche Jim had merely time to take a glance at his surroundings, as he was carried up a handsome drive, and then he saw looming up before him on a cross-bar, a powerful kerosene lamp which pointed out the wide entrance of the yard with the high stockade.

Another moment, and the steer was within the yard, and here he slackened his pace, at the same time directing his course toward the interior door of the small square building where he was habitually quartered.

This door was open, as was shown by a second lamp hanging over it, but it was too narrow and low for Jim to undertake to ride through it, and he promptly slid to the ground and glanced swiftly about for a hiding-place, just as the steer finished his wild and lengthy run by stepping briskly through the doorway into his stable, disappearing from the view of his jaded rider.

For one brief moment a weird, wondering face—that of Jed, the half-breed—looked out upon Comanche Jim, and then the massive door leading from the stable into the yard was closed with a slam, and bolted and barred from within.

CHAPTER XX.

"A MAN ON HIM!"

THE strange ride of Comanche Jim had ended but not the dangers resulting from it.

In fact, his perils might have been said to be merely beginning.

What a fix he was in!

He had been landed in the midst of more than a score of enemies.

As he realized this fact, the foremost of the stampeded cattle came thundering into the yard.

As they caught sight of the high stockade all around them, they tossed their heads higher than ever, with renewed terror.

They seemed to feel that they were in some sort of a trap, and to ask themselves what had become of the decoy they had so long followed.

Changing their pace from a gallop to a trot, they made their way around the inclosure, close to the stockade, swaying their heads from side to side, and gradually moderating their pace, until they had come to a halt.

Some of them, as if still guided by the odor which had been so fatal to them, took their way to the door of the steer's stable, where they halted.

All this while, too, scores of cattle were rushing through the wide gateway of the inclosure, and coming to a halt beside their predecessors.

But Comanche Jim had waited for none of these proceedings.

Although he had never been there before, he yet knew in a general way the "lay of the land," as is shown in the description he had given to his employer of it.

For this information, we may as well add here, he was chiefly indebted to Theopolus Drawback, one of the conspirators of our second chapter, who had made two or three secret visits to the island.

These visits had been partly occasioned by curiosity, but were more especially undertaken with a view to the discovery of some secret upon which Theopolus could trade.

Theopolus had realized that Salt Island had become the center of some flourishing contraband trade, and he had taken good care to find out as much about it as he could without too seriously jeopardizing his life and liberty.

If he had not been favored with the personal acquaintance of Colonel Vann, he had certainly heard enough about that personage to have a lively curiosity concerning him; and even a keen sense of apprehension.

His visits had accordingly been made at the hour when nature and man are alike quiet, or between twelve and two in the morning.

As we have seen, Theopolus had so little faith in his associate, Thad Burrows, or so little in himself, or such a realizing sense of Sam Hooper's character and capacity, that he had not been able to take much stock in the scheme of Burrows for robbing Sam, as we have duly related.

And such being the case, he had hastened to place himself in communication with Comanche Jim, and to sell his secret for as much as he could, not forgetting to make especial mention of a barrel of whisky.

Having taken this course, it was only a step

in the same direction for Theopolus to tell Jim what he had learned about Vann.

At Jim's request, he had even drawn a rude chart of the island, and of the various buildings and yards upon it.

In a general way, therefore, Jim had a tolerably complete knowledge of his surroundings, although this was his first visit to the island.

He knew where the colonel's house was, as well as the whereabouts of the wharf, and of the stern-wheel steamer which lay periodically beside it.

He also knew where stood the slaughter-house, that building having been one of the objective points of all his inquiries of Theopolus.

Without a minute's delay, therefore, and with a celerity of movement called for by the occasion, Jim hastily slipped out of the yard, dodging the cattle which were still pouring into it, and took his way toward the building in question.

He knew that the slaughter-house would naturally be at no great distance from the back of the yard, as the cattle were taken thither in groups or singly to be slaughtered, and he did not doubt that he could readily follow the path leading to it, as intense as was the darkness around him.

The result verified his expectations.

The path between the yard and the slaughter-house was not merely a drive, fifteen or twenty feet wide, but it was bordered on either side by shrubs and trees, which offered every necessary guidance, presenting themselves alike to Jim's seeing and feeling.

Traversing this path rapidly, Jim reached, at the distance of ten or twelve rods from the yard, the great double doors of the slaughter-house, the interior of which was dimly illuminated by a number of lamps.

After the force he had seen awaiting the stampeded cattle on the west bank of the river, Jim did not apprehend that the slaughter-house was particularly alive with occupants at that moment, but he nevertheless approached the doors with a caution called for by the simple fact that they were wide open.

A few cautious glances within told him that no one was stirring.

The place had simply been opened by the half-breed, so as to be ready for business.

The first thought of Comanche Jim, naturally enough, was to find a snug place of concealment in the interior of the building, and become a witness of all that might occur there in the course of the night.

But this was easier said than done.

So far as he could see from the doorway, as he peered cautiously in, the whole interior of the building had been thrown into a single apartment, which had neither nooks nor obscurities, but was readily accessible to sight and movement.

As he had been seen to arrive, not merely by the half-breed, but by at least several of the men who had assisted in running the stampeded cattle across the ford, it was morally certain that a rigid search would speedily be made for him.

He must either conceal himself promptly, or take a hurried departure.

Jim's mental discussion as to the course he should take was not a long one.

His feelings had been sufficiently enlisted to make him eager to ferret out the secrets of his daring and dangerous enemy.

In a word, he was resolved to incur almost any reasonable risk in quest of information, rather than go away empty-handed.

Even as he thought and looked—at the same time listening to the noise and confusion between him and the ford—his glances encountered one of those stately and symmetrical white oaks which are possible only when they stand alone, in favorable conditions, with plenty of air, light and moisture around them.

This oak was two or three feet in diameter, and towered high above the slaughter-house, which had been built close beside it, and had immense limbs overhanging the roof, as well as branching out in every other direction.

There were no limbs within four or five yards of the ground, but so much the better, in view of Jim's strength and agility.

A single brief glance at this towering monarch, so far as he could see it by the faint light streaming from the open doors, and Jim's resolve was taken.

He would stow himself away in the thick foliage of this oak, and take his chances.

At the worst, he could sell his life dearly, as he was still in possession of his revolver.

The next instant he had gained the lower limbs of the tree, and was disappearing amid its leaves and branches.

Just in time, too!

At that very moment a couple of horsemen came swiftly around the nearest corner of the high stockade, and dashed up the drive toward the slaughter-house.

They were Colonel Vann and Weezy.

Their way was lighted by a couple of men who ran by their sides, carrying blazing torches.

"A man on him?" Colonel Vann was saying, as eagerly as excitedly. "Are you sure, Wuggy?"

"Perfectly sure, sir," was the answer of one

of the runners. "Mink and I both saw him. He was on the steer's back all the way, and to the very door of the stable!"

"Then he cannot be far distant!" cried Colonel Vann. "Sound the alarm, Wugg! Call all the boys as soon as the cattle are secured! We must find out who that man is!"

Jim smiled understandingly.
The hunt for him was begun!

CHAPTER XXI.

A CHAMPION LIAR.

REACHING the doors of the slaughter-house, the colonel and Weezy dismounted, handing their bridles to the two worthies carrying the torches.

The two horses were panting and foam-flecked, being the same Vann and his factotum had ridden from the camp of the cowboys.

At the very moment when master and man thus slipped to the ground, there was a great outburst of shouts and cries at one side of the stockade encircling the stampeded cattle.

"Here he is!"

"This is the man!"

"Don't let him get away!"

"Kill him if he tries to escape!"

These were merely a portion of the shouts which blended into one general tumult.

The gaze of Colonel Vann was promptly turned toward the scene of disturbance.

"Evidently our search is not to be a long one," he declared, with a chuckle of satisfaction. "The intruder is already discovered. Send him this way, Wugg, as you and Mink take the horses to the stable, and be quick about it."

Wugg and Mink hastened to obey, and at the end of a few moments a confused and struggling mass of humanity, with some object in their midst, were seen scuffling up the walk in the direction of the spot where stood the colonel and Weezy.

"Silence, all of you!" thundered the Colonel, as the confusion began again. "Bring the man here, and hold your tongues until you are spoken to!"

"Thanks, colonel Vann," came from the centre of the noisy group. "Let go of me, I say! Don't you hear your master speaking to you? Such a pack of yelping curs! There!"

With a supreme effort the pioneer wrested himself from the two men who had been the most violent, and quickened his pace toward the spot where Vann stood awaiting him.

"It's to be hoped that you'll be able to teach these blackguards better manners, Colonel Vann," added the new-comer, as he arrived under the colonel's gaze and removed his hat, making a polite bow. "They could not have treated me worse if I had killed two or three of them!"

The colonel made two or three gestures in rapid succession, as the result of which ample space was cleared around the speaker, and a lantern was brought from the interior of the slaughter-house and handed to the colonel.

"Who are you?" then asked Vann, as he flashed the rays of the lantern into the face of the man who had thus entered his presence.

"I know you well by sight, Colonel Vann, although you do not know me," was the answer. "My name is Drawback, sir—Theopolus Drawback!"

Jim started violently.

From his perch in the oak, he was suspended almost over the new-comers, and could look directly into the upturned face of the prisoner.

That face was pale, and even agitated, but it indicated self-possession, and even attested that its possessor was conscious of being able to tell his accusers a good story.

"Well, Mr. Drawback," returned Vann, with glances full of suspicion, "your name ought to be changed to Goahead, if I may judge by the unexpected manner in which you have turned up here. When did you arrive and how did you come, and what is your business, if I may be so bold as to ask these questions?"

Theopolus glared around, a little uneasily, and with considerable hesitation, as if he were at a loss for words or facts to explain his presence.

"Oh, he means to deny it," exclaimed one of his captors, "but he needn't! I saw him on the back of the steer, just as plainly as I see you at this moment, Colonel Vann! He arrived on the steer!"

"I saw him!" cried another.

"And so did I!" cried a third.

The colonel's face clouded.

He looked uncommonly puzzled.

"Is this so, Mr. Drawback?" he demanded.

"It is—as I was getting ready to tell you—as soon as I can get my breath!" avowed Drawback. "Do I look, colonel, as if I were fool enough to deny the evidence of all these men?"

"You really arrived, then, on the back of the steer?" proceeded Vann.

"I did, sir!"

The effect of these words upon the occupant of the oak can be imagined.

As was natural, he drew a long sigh of relief, with mental thanks to the dubious acquaintance who had so unexpectedly come to his rescue.

"But how did you come there?" pursued the colonel, his grim features growing less savage.

"As you will readily believe, sir," replied Drawback, "in the language of the immortal William, 'thereby hangs a tale!' Perhaps you know where I reside, colonel?"

Vann nodded assent.

"That is as much as to say that you know who I am," declared Drawback.

"Well, yes," admitted Vann. "That is, I know you are Theopolus Drawback. I've seen you on your own premises, and also riding with Thad Burrows."

Drawback bowed his acknowledgments.

The reader, of course, will readily guess how the rascal happened to be present.

He had come to the island on another of his secret exploring expeditions, and had been prowling about the premises ever since night-fall.

While thus engaged he had been surprised by the arrival of the stampeded cattle, with Diablo at their head, and had barely been able to avoid being run over by them, after staring in wonder at the foremost steer and its rider until they had vanished into the receiving-yard, as related.

In fact, he had become so mixed up in the new arrivals as to be unable to take his departure undetected, and had in due course been run down and captured.

But here his consummate impudence came to his deliverance.

Having seen with his own eyes a man on the steer, he was quite prepared to believe his captors when they declared that *they* had seen one, and it did not take him the tenth of a second to resolve to explain his presence upon this basis, as he well knew that it would be quite impossible to explain it upon any other.

Of course he did not ask himself whether this measure would be hurtful or helpful to the man who had actually ridden the steer.

All he thought of at the moment was to extricate himself from the close quarters into which he had tumbled.

"And now, proceed with your explanation, Mr. Drawback," added Vann. "I am really curious to see how you can have reached such an extraordinary situation."

"And yet the tale's as simple as kissing," said Drawback, with a guileful smile. "It happened this way. I had gone half-way across the valley, in the direction of Cantonment, to see my brother, when my horse suddenly went lame, and I left him with a half-breed settler, setting out to return on foot. Unfortunately, I missed my way, just after dark, and bore away to the south, a long distance out of my course, and at length found myself quite at sea in regard to my whereabouts. I was just in the act of asking myself if I could avoid passing the night in a tree-top, when I heard a tremendous trampling across an open prairie to the south of me, and realized that a drove of cattle was coming. I had barely time to light a splinter, when they were upon me! Of course I gave myself up for lost. As luck would have it, however, the foremost steer happened to come directly toward me. I moved to one side enough to let him pass, at the same time measuring the distance. As his head was passing me, I caught at his left horn with my left hand and at his back with my right, at the same time giving a tremendous jump, and was so fortunate as to land upon his back, in such a position that I was able to hold on and to be carried along with him. This is how I was saved, and this is how and why I am here, sir!"

He finished with an air of being quite at his ease, and as one who has completely vindicated himself from all aspersions and suspicions.

"A very wonderful rescue," was the comment of Colonel Vann. "Of course you were greatly helped by what you found on the steer!"

"What—I found upon him?" faltered Drawback, looking as puzzled as uneasy.

"Yes. Of course you found something upon the back of the steer!"

"Why—yes—of course," stammered the enterprising narrator, turning all sorts of colors. "I found his hair to cling to!"

"Ah, indeed!"

Colonel Vann stepped nearer.

His face exhibited a strange flush, which had come with lightning-like quickness, for at first he had not had a doubt of the speaker's good faith and truthfulness.

"That is not what I mean, Mr. Drawback," he remarked, more seriously than before.

"There was something on the back of the steer—something that had been put there. Now, what was it?"

The prisoner stirred again uneasily, a strange pallor suddenly invading his countenance.

"You—you are joking," he said. "The steer had nothing on his back, colonel!"

"Nothing, sir?"

"Absolutely nothing!"

"No saddle, Mr. Drawback?"

"Certainly not. Who ever heard of such a thing?"

"No blankets? No coverings?"

"What do you take me for?"

"Nothing that rattled, like a chain?"

"What an absurdity!"

"Nothing that felt hard and rough under you, Mr. Drawback?"

"What are you driving at?"

"Nothing soft? nothing sticky? nothing that gave out a strange odor?"

"My dear Colonel Vann! let us have done with all this fooling! Or else I shall think that you are no longer in possession of your senses!"

"Enough!" roared the colonel. "Seize this man, boys!"

Of course the "boys" were ready.

They had foreseen, by the awful botch into which Drawback had fallen, that the order for his seizure would quickly be forthcoming.

In less time than it takes to record the fact, Theopolus was seized and bound hand and foot, while vainly protesting against this violence.

"What does this mean, colonel?" he then demanded.

"It means only that you are the champion liar of the Nation!" cried Vann. "You are simply here as a spy! You have sneaked over to the island, or rather landed upon it from a boat, in order to see what we are doing! I'm tempted to throw you into the river! The only thing that can save you is an instant and full confession! How did you come here?"

"I—I came in a boat, as you have suggested," stammered the prisoner.

"With what purpose?"

"Simply out of curiosity. I—I merely wanted to look about!"

"And you didn't come on the steer?"

"I know nothing about your steer!" growled Drawback, with the energy of desperation. "I came to see what was going on here, and that is all there is about it. You may kill me, if you choose," he added, his anger rising, "but all you can make out of it is a case of simple trespass!"

"Well, we'll see about that," retorted Colonel Vann, angrily. "Take him to the cellar of the barn, Moller, and chain him to a post."

The man addressed, with the aid of three or four others, hastened to obey.

"And now look sharp, the rest of you," cried Vann. "As you have seen, this is not the man who came here on the steer. We've simply been breaking up the wrong tree. Lively, all! Let's see if we cannot catch the right man. Take charge of this hunt, Weezy!"

At this Jim smiled again.

The situation was getting exciting!

CHAPTER XXII.

THE STEER'S KEEPER.

THE men to whom Vann's orders were given were prompt to obey, Weezy directing their efforts.

Securing torches and lanterns, they began their explorations.

"Search every foot of the island before you give it up," added the colonel. "I would not fail to discover *who* that man is, and *where* he is, for a great deal of money!"

He reflected a moment, and added,

"I'll give a hundred dollars to the man who finds him!"

Comanche Jim smiled again.

It was the first time he had ever been the object of a reward.

The searchers exhibited a zeal worthy of the colonel's offer, visiting every nook and corner large enough to hold a man, and thoroughly beating up every bush and shrub they encountered.

"Of course we shall have him if he's still on the island," muttered Vann, as he lighted a cigar. "But I fancy he has made good use of the time allowed him, and taken his departure about as rapidly as he came."

The remark was more encouraging to Comanche Jim than to those to whom it was addressed.

It at least attested that Vann himself entertained no very lively hope of securing the mysterious intruder.

Turning away a little nervously, as if troubled by the problems presented by the unknown rider of Diablo, Vann took his way to the stable of his favorite, where Jed was engaged in rubbing the animal from his horns to his hoofs with wisps of straw.

The half-breed had of course been prompt to remove the coverings and chain from the steer's back, and had entered upon the task of drying him with as much zeal as if he had been one of the great trotters of the day.

The animal had seemed a little drooping until aroused by the footsteps of his owner, but at sight of him all listlessness vanished.

Drawing a small flask from a breast-pocket Vann emptied its contents into a couple of quarts of water, and allowed the steer to drink it, which he did with such eagerness that it only made three swallows.

"He's getting harder than he was, Jed," remarked the colonel, as he felt of the animal's flanks. "We've just hit it in his feed and in his doses."

The half-breed assented, but without pausing a moment in his labors.

"Did you find any dents in his armor, Jed?" pursued the colonel.

"I did, sir—too dents, one of them almost a break," was the answer.

"Ah, I was sure of it," cried Vann. "There was a man in that group of cottonwoods who got two shots at him!"

He stepped to a large tub at the rear of the stable in which the armor had been put asoak in a cleansing liquid for an hour, and gave it a close but rapid examination.

"Yes, here are the places where the balls struck," he muttered. "Several of the links are knocked askew considerably. Those balls were fired from the cottonwood at the moment I turned the steer loose!"

Replacing the armor in the tub, he returned to Diablo, and passed his hands over the animal's back and shoulders, soon finding a couple of sore or tender spots, where even a slight pressure caused the decoy to wince.

"Sure enough," muttered Vann. "The balls stung him severely, despite the thickness of the quilts. That chain armor is just what its maker said it was. If Diablo had been bare-backed at the moment of receiving either of those shots, he would have been a dead steer."

"True, sir," ventured Jed. "And since the armor is such a good thing for Diablo, why would it not be equally good for you?"

Vann smiled strangely, but did not reply, and Jed comprehended that the subject was one about which his master was not quite at his ease.

The truth was, the colonel had ordered an armor of some kind and from the same maker for himself, and had been chafing for a day or two because it had not arrived quite as promptly as promised.

"Do you have any difficulty in getting up and down that ladder, Jed?" he asked, by way of changing the conversation.

"Not the slightest, sir," was the answer.

The ladder in question had been secured at one side of the apartment, in a perpendicular position, and was used to communicate with a loft immediately over the steer.

"And how do you sleep up there?" continued the colonel. "Comfortably?"

"Never more so!"

"Does Diablo disturb you?"

"Not at all, colonel. He's as quiet as a lamb, especially after he has had one of his runs."

"Are you easily awakened, after you have got off soundly?"

"Yes, sir. The least sound is sufficient to start me out of the soundest slumber!"

The colonel looked pleased.

"I am glad such is the case," he declared.

"As you may be aware, there is a great deal of curiosity in the neighborhood in regard to the animal we keep shut up here so closely, and under such strict guard. I have myself told several stories in regard to the matter. To one I've talked of a wonderful horse, to another of a marvelous Jersey bull, and to others of a pet bear, so that there must be any quantity of opinions afloat on the subject. You have always kept strictly locked up in my absence?"

"Yes, sir."

"You've given no one a chance to intrude?"

"Certainly not, sir."

"Well, continue to keep wide awake on this subject, and if you find any one lounging about the premises, do not fail to report the fact promptly. Notwithstanding our secrecy, I have a suspicion that some of those cattle-men in the Oklahoma Country have formed a pretty clear notion of the facts in the case, since we have been operating in this vicinity, and I should not be surprised if some of them made an attempt soon to get into Diablo's stable and kill him!"

"Oh, they cannot do that, colonel," returned Jed, waving his hand toward the bolts and bars in sight. "The place is too much like a prison for any one to be able to force an entrance. Besides, as you are aware, colonel, I keep a loaded Winchester at the head of my bed, and I know how to use it!"

"That's the right spirit, Jed!" commented the colonel, with a gratified look. "I am glad to see you so faithful to your trust. Wouldn't you like company nights?"

"No, sir."

"Not such a man as Wugg, for instance?"

The half-breed shook his head.

"I do not want any one, colonel," he declared emphatically, "and even if I did, I should not want Wugg. He's the last man in the world I should want for company. I don't like him!"

"Any particular reason for your dislike?"

"Only that he seems a sneak, sir. I find him hanging about in places where he has no business. He has made several attempts to drop in to see me, but hasn't yet made a success of it."

The colonel looked serious.

"We haven't had him here more than two months, have we?" he asked.

"Hardly that, colonel. Ten to one there's something wrong about him!"

"You think so? Then I must look after him, Jed. I remember taking him in when we were short of help, but he must have told me a good story about himself, or I shouldn't have hired him. You find no cuts or bruises on Diablo's legs?"

"None, sir."

"He seems quite dry," said Vann, feeling of the leg nearest him, and glancing at the others, with all of which Jed had been busy. "You

may do him up in new flannels to the knees all around, and put one of the lightest flannel blankets on him, as soon as he is dry on the loins."

"That was my idea, colonel," returned Jed, as busy as ever. "When shall I feed him?"

"As soon as he has cooled off sufficiently, coddling him as usual in the mean time with a few mouthfuls of hot mash. I have never seen him make a better run. Think of it, too! There was a man on his back!"

"Yes, sir. I saw him."

"You did?" and Vann started. "But I might have known it. You are always on the lookout for the return of Diablo, as I have noticed. Pity you couldn't have seen who the man was."

"But I did see, colonel."

"Is it possible? Who was he?"

"Comanche Jim!"

The colonel started more violently than before, his face losing color.

"Comanche Jim!" he echoed. "You saw him, you say?"

"As plainly as I see you at this moment, just as he dismounted outside of yonder door!"

"And where did he go?"

"That I cannot say, no more than I can say how he came to be upon the steer's back. I slammed the door in his face as soon as I saw him."

"This is serious," declared Vann, turning toward the outer door. "I must see what progress is being made in the search for him. I leave Diablo in your charge for the night. Take good care of him, and don't let any one steal him or kill him."

And with this, Vann hastened to let himself out of the stable, making use of the same key with which he had given himself admittance.

CHAPTER XXIII.

VANN'S ASSOCIATES AND SURROUNDINGS.

As Colonel Vann emerged from the stable of the decoy steer, he almost stumbled over the man of whom the half-breed had spoken so frankly—Wugg.

"What! you here?" greeted the colonel, with mingled wrath and suspicion. "I thought I sent you to the stable with Mink to look after the horses Weezy and I have been using!"

"Quite right, sir," returned Wugg deprecatingly. "I was coming to tell you that the boys have not yet found any trace of the intruder who came on the back of the steer!"

"Well, the boys can make their own reports when they get ready," declared Vann, with undisguised annoyance. "You are not called upon to speak for them!"

"But I thought, colonel—"

"I do not care what you thought. Go back to the stable and stay there until you hear from me to the contrary. Is Mink there?"

"Of course, sir, or I should not have ventured—"

The colonel waved his hand imperatively, cutting short the remarks of Wugg, who turned and retreated with an air of relief, hurrying toward the building devoted to the colonel's numerous horses.

"The hound!" muttered Vann, looking after him, with suppressed fury. "That's the curse of this reptilian brood! You are compelled to have them around you, and even trust them with more or less of your secrets, but you never know when they will open the doors to your enemies, or tell all they know just where it will do the most harm!"

He continued to look after the offender until all sight and sign of him had vanished.

"Of course he is a sneak, as Jed declared," resumed the master of Salt Island, as he lighted a fresh cigar. "He was here to watch and listen, and see what he could discover. I'm half-tempted to wrap him up in hemp and send him to the cellar of the barn to keep that Draw-back company. But first let me catch him at it!"

He finished with a gesture which boded ill for the eavesdropper, in case he were to be roundly caught plying his trade at any future moment.

Resuming progress, Vann soon arrived at the gates of the yard with the high stockade.

The lamp before referred to was still burning upon the cross-bar above the opening, and Vann, after a keen survey of his surroundings, including a glance within the yard, reached up his hand and extinguished the light.

"I was just going to do that, colonel," said a voice on the opposite side of the gate.

"Ah, it's you, Kriss? Are the cattle all in?"

"All but two or three, I think. One has gone up the west bank, and another missed the ford and swam off up-stream, but he'll be likely to land somewhere before he gets out of the Nation."

"How many are there in all, Kriss?"

"Something more than three hundred, colonel. Perhaps three hundred and thirty."

The colonel's eyes brightened, as he peered through the gate at the stampeded cattle.

They had become comparatively quiet, and did not seem to mind at all their long run, as the water into which they had plunged in reaching the island had seemed to cool and calm them.

"A fine lot," was Vann's comment. "Rather more, too, than we've secured before at any one time. Wind and weather were alike favorable. Then, too, the route from the camp of the cowboys is as plain as a highway. A good lot! A good lot! You saw nothing of any pursuers, Kriss?"

"Not the least trace, sir!"

"Have you posted the guards?"

"Oh, a long time ago, when the last steer crossed. There's a man at each side of the island, and two men in boats patrolling the river, besides the watchman on the steamer!"

"That is as it should be, Kriss," commented Vann. "We cannot be too much on our guard. No doubt many an eye is now turned in the direction of Salt Island. But they'll look in vain! In another week I shall have made an end of the Hooper drove, and possibly of the Hoopers with it! Of course there'll be suspicions against me, and a possible investigation, but I have acted, and shall continue to act, in such a way that nothing more than a scandal can come of it. Such really dangerous enemies as I have can be suppressed permanently in one way or another, and all the rest can be bribed or scared into secrecy and silence!"

It was not often that Vann talked with this freedom to anybody save Weezy, but Kriss stood next in his confidence to the factotum, and had been a long time with him, always giving entire satisfaction.

Besides, the pay Kriss was getting for his services was quite enough to command his fidelity indefinitely.

He was known as the stockmaster.

He not only had charge of all the cattle habitually kept on the island as a blind, but it was his business to take charge of the butchers and others and receive all the cattle secured by the stampedeers.

"Have the boys begun killing?" added Vann, after listening intently a few moments, and scanning anew his surroundings.

"Yes, sir. I thought I'd be prompt about it, having so many to deal with. You've no special orders for me?"

"No, unless to ask you to look sharp for that man who arrived here on the back of Diablo, and who is no less a personage than Comanche Jim, the man who has charge of the Hooper cattle."

"Indeed! Then it's essential to find him, or at least assure ourselves that he is no longer here to spy out our business. Are you going to the slaughter-house?"

Vann nodded affirmatively.

"Then I'll go along with you," and Kriss suited the action to the word by climbing over the gate. "My intention is to take a turn myself in search of the intruder, as soon as I've seen that the butchers are fairly at work."

"A good idea, Kriss," said Vann, as he led the way toward the drive connecting the slaughter-house with the cattle-yard. "The knowledge that Comanche Jim may even now be on the island—perhaps not a dozen rods from us—is enough to give me the jim-jams! We've made a grand success of our contraband trade thus far, and I am more anxious than ever to keep the spies out."

"Oh, we'll find him!" declared Kriss, as the couple reached the drive and took their way toward the slaughter-house, "or else we'll dislodge him and drive him out."

The couple were soon abreast of the tree in which Jim had taken refuge, and here the stockmaster suddenly halted, as if by the influence of a sudden thought.

"How would it do, colonel," he asked, "to let loose the hounds?"

"I've thought of that, of course," responded Vann, "but dread the remedy almost as much as the disease. They're too noisy! Nevertheless, if we cannot do better, we shall be compelled to use the dogs, if we mean to be sure that Comanche Jim has vacated! Ah, here comes Weezy," added the colonel, as a figure came briskly around the corner of the slaughter-house and approached him. "Perhaps he has news for us!"

The face of Comanche Jim, as he looked down upon the group from his perch in the oak tree, became unusually serious.

That mention of "hounds" concerned him closely.

CHAPTER XXIV.

JIM HEARS STARTLING NEWS.

THE face of Weezy, as he emerged into the light streaming from the doorway of the slaughter-house, was a sufficient announcement of the result of his search.

"We've failed to find the least trace of the strange man," he reported, "and I thought best to be getting back here. What do you say, colonel, to letting loose the dogs?"

"I should have taken that course already, Weezy," answered Vann, "only they're puppies, and have more bark than pith. Have you looked in every place where an intruder would naturally take refuge?"

"In every corner and hole big enough to hide a man," answered Weezy emphatically. "Unless the intruder is in the fields toward the north

end of the island, or has climbed some tree in the grove, he must have taken his departure."

"Speaking of trees," remarked Vann, as he glanced into the spreading branches of the oak beside him, "the fellow may have stowed himself away in one nearer than you think. He may even be in this one, listening to every word we utter!"

The mere suggestion was startling.

Every eye was promptly turned in the direction indicated.

"The dogs would soon settle that point," suggested the stockmaster. "Suppose we try 'em?"

"Very well," responded the colonel. "You may go for 'em, Weezy!"

Weezy took his way toward the stable appropriated to the horses.

"We'll wait for you here," called Colonel Vann after him. "Keep the dogs in hand. I've not yet decided whether to let 'em loose or not. That will depend upon how they act."

He reflected a few moments, while Weezy vanished, and then added:

"The fellow left the steer in the yard, at the inner door, as I learn from Jed, but we can't get in there with the dogs just now to pick up the trail. The best we can do, I think, is to try to pick it up on the drive. He would have been very likely to come this way, the more especially as a gleam of light in the slaughter-house must have fixed his attention."

He stepped aside, as did the stockmaster, to allow a second batch of steers to pass, in the hands of the butchers, and looked at the group they presented, as they vanished into the interior of the building.

As dangerous as his situation seemed to be, Jim had not taken the least step toward becoming conspicuous by his absence.

He had remarked that the limb he occupied reached to the edge of the roof, and had not the least doubt of being able, in case of necessity, of traversing the roof quite as soon as any one could go around the building.

The leap to the ground from the eaves was likely to be a long one to be sure, and even a dangerous one, as he could not see where he was to land, but he was too eager in the hunt upon which he had entered to hesitate a moment about taking his chances.

And once on the ground, revolver in hand, he felt competent to take care of himself, whatever might be the number of his enemies.

He had reflected that the boat used by Theopolus Drawback in reaching the island must be lying somewhere along the shore, and he had little doubt of being able to find it, the necessity arising.

Besides, his presence in the tree-top had not yet been discovered, and it was possible that it would not be just at present, if he continued to remain as silent and motionless as he had hitherto done.

It would depend somewhat upon chance, and a great deal upon the dogs which were to be brought against him.

Jim remained perfectly quiet, therefore, continuing to watch and listen.

"If you're tired, Kriss," suddenly observed the colonel, as he began racing to and fro uneasily on the drive, "you'd better get to bed, so as to be wide awake toward morning, when the bulk of these cattle will have lost their hides and be ready for the steamer."

"Oh, I'm not at all in need of sleep," returned the stockmaster, "and prefer to make a night of it. That man on the steer has caused me a little anxiety and nervousness, I think."

"My case exactly," answered Vann. "If the dogs don't turn him out, you and I will equip ourselves with dark-lanterns and go in quest of him."

Comanche Jim now comprehended fully the nature of Colonel Vann's "business."

He was a wholesale butcher for various distant markets.

The purveyor of some of the great meat-dealers of St. Louis, Chicago, Louisville and Cincinnati.

With this advantage, too, over the Libbys, the Armours, and other notable competitors, namely, that he stole his cattle.

"The fact is," resumed Vann, after a thoughtful pause, "I have enough on my hands just now to keep me wakeful. Among other notable events for to-morrow, I expect my prospective bride to arrive here at an early hour of the morning!"

"Indeed! Your prospective bride, colonel! I was not aware that you contemplated matrimony!" exclaimed the stockmaster.

"Oh, yes," and Vann smiled wickedly, showing his white teeth. "I'll tell you more about it. The young lady in question is a Miss Allington!"

How eagerly Jim inclined his ear.

The villain was speaking of the betrothed of the young cattle-dealer.

"The fair maid of my choice," proceeded Vann, twisting his mustache excitedly, as he continued to walk to and fro, "lives in Wichita, Kansas. I have known her some years, but I am sorry to add that I do not hold the first place in her affections. She has, in fact, had the honor of rejecting me so many times that I have forgotten the exact number."

The stockmaster grew interested.

The very mien of Colonel Vann was provocative of the keenest attention.

"To be frank with you," resumed the colonel, "Miss Allington is so far from reciprocating my ardent suit that she is the betrothed of Sam Hooper."

"Ah!" exclaimed Kriss.

A flood of light had burst upon him!

"In wooing Miss Allington, therefore, I kill two birds with one stone! I gratify extremely both love and hate! Loving the girl as intensely as I hate Sam Hooper, I have promised myself a double triumph—that of securing Miss Allington while I get rid of young Hooper! Do you see the point, Kriss?"

"I do indeed! But what about the girl's arrival here to-morrow?"

"Oh, I've tricked her with a telegram," avowed Vann, with a laugh. "I need not go into details. She is coming directly to Salt Island, and will arrive with the conviction that her lover has had an encounter with me, and that he is barely alive!"

"But is she sure to come, colonel?"

"Come? Why, that very question shows that you know nothing of a woman's heart! Will she come? If all the mad-dogs in the world, and all the tigers, lions, and rattlesnakes, were to be waiting here for her, she'd no more be kept away, or even hesitate about coming, than you'd hesitate to eat a good dinner when hungry! Fact is, old fellow, I've had some experience with the woman, and I know just what to say to fetch her!"

"I see! You've taken time by the forelock!"

"As I generally do, Kriss! The moment I was sure of the departure of Sam Hooper from Wichita, that moment I telegraphed to my agent in that city, and I've been as busy as a spider ever since, weaving my web in a dozen different directions, at an expense of hundreds of dollars!"

"I know how thorough you are, colonel, when you have once made up your mind to carry your point," commented the stockmaster.

"You bet! And as a proof of what we are saying, I'll tell you now that I've left Pepper and Salt at the camp of the cowboys, with orders to make an end of Sam Hooper between now and morning! Is not that gay? He'll be out of the way before his girl gets here, and I shall have plain sailing!"

"But of course old Hooper or some of her friends will come with her!"

"So much the better! Nothing'd please me better than to lay hands on Hooper and his wife! They'd pay a king's ransom before they ever see Kansas again! But why don't Weezy return with those puppies? Is he waiting for them to become fully grown?"

"No, colonel! Yonder he comes!"

The face with which the factotum came back was considerably more elongated than that with which he had departed.

But his step was livelier than ever.

"Why, where are your dogs?" cried Vann, seeing that his factotum was wholly unaccompanied.

"They're dead, colonel!" was the answer.

"Dead!" cried Vann and Kriss in chorus.

"Yes. I found one of them dead and the other just expiring. They've been poisoned!"

"Poisoned! But with what motive? And by whom?"

"I can only suppose that the poisoner is the man who arrived on the back of the steer," declared Weezy. "Evidently he has come here to investigate us, and has poisoned the dogs with a view to rid himself of all danger from them."

"Who's in the stable?"

"Only Wugg and Mink."

"Of course you questioned them. Have they seen anybody prowling around thereabouts?"

"Not a soul, colonel. Wugg, however, fancied he heard some one in a stall next the bin beside which the puppies have been chained."

"Wugg be—"

The colonel was tempted to say something emphatic, but he restrained himself.

It was no part of his plans to allow Wugg to hear that he had become an object of well-defined suspicion.

"A likely story," he resumed. "What! a stranger in the stalls, and the puppies did not even bark at him! Carry that to Grover! Besides, what would Comanche Jim care for the dogs, especially as they are kept chained? How could he have learned where they were? How could he go and come unseen? What object in taking such risks? Nonsense, Wheezy!"

He paused abruptly, as if he did not care to reveal his entire sentiments.

"You'll remember," he added, "that this is not the first case of the kind. The old dog was found poisoned less than ten days ago! Clearly enough, some one is getting ready for business, with a clear field and no favors!"

The colonel could have said more.

He had his own ideas on the subject of both of these poisonings, and had already ascribed them in his own mind to Wugg.

Wugg was busy with some game!

Perhaps he intended to steal the steer or kill him!

"But of all this later," concluded Vann. "Get

a lantern or two, Weezy, and you and Kriss and I will resume the search for the intruder."

Weezy moved toward the slaughter-house, but had not taken half a dozen steps when a band of his searchers came around the end of that building, lighting their way with lanterns.

"Here's just what we need, colonel," he said, retracing his steps.

"Seen anything?" asked Vann, addressing the foremost of the new-comers.

"Only a boat," was the answer.

"A boat? Where is it?"

"On the east side of the island, at the end of the fence."

"You left it there?"

The man assented.

"It's the boat in which Theopolus Drawback made a wreck of his schemes," said the colonel, with a smile. "You can leave it there for the present. Get into the mill, all of you," he added, indicating the slaughter-house, "and make as good time as you can, while we look after the intruder."

He had helped himself to a lantern while speaking, as had Kriss and Weezy, and in another moment the two were in motion, proceeding in the direction of the colonel's dwelling, his employees at the same time proceeding to act upon the orders they had received from him.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE TWO INTRUDERS.

THE first impulse of Comanche Jim, as he looked after the retreating figures of his enemies, was to descend from the tree, and make his way back to camp at the earliest possible moment.

He literally trembled at the peril to which young Hooper and his betrothed were exposed.

The one to be murdered!

The other—

He could not consider such a terrible possibility as the capture of Miss Allington by that brutal and vulgar assassin!

Startled and eager, his brain in a whirl, Jim rapidly passed in review the principal facts and features of his situation.

He was still in the stronghold of the contraband cattle-killers, and at least twelve or fourteen miles in an air line from his friends.

He could not reach either bank of the river without a thorough wetting.

The darkness around him was denser than ever.

He had even felt a few drops of rain, which he knew were the forerunner of a smart shower, if nothing worse.

He had neither lantern nor compass.

He had only a general knowledge of the country between Salt Island and the camp, having never passed over it until he had traversed it on the back of the steer.

How could the return be accomplished?

His thoughts flew to the boat with which Theopolus Drawback had invaded the island.

That boat, after what Jim had overheard concerning it, could be readily found, if he could light his search with a lantern.

By securing it, he could drop down the river and land with dry garments.

In fact, it would be quite in his way to descend the river four miles in the boat, inasmuch as the course of the Cimarron for that distance below Salt Island is almost in a north-and-south direction.

Landing at that point, he would have the camp south-west-by-east, and only nine or ten miles distant.

There were some "draws" on the route, some patches of woods, he could not doubt, after what he saw of the reservation, but he carried water-proof matches, and he felt certain that he would be able to light his way by some process without much trouble.

He might even secure some torches of the cattle-killers before he left the island, or one of their lamps or lanterns.

In any case he must go.

He was anxious to warn young Hooper of the danger to which he was exposed from the two red-skins.

Equally eager to tell him of the fiendish machinations of which his betrothed was the object.

The killing of the stampeded cattle, the loading of their carcasses upon the stern-wheel steamer, the proceedings of Vann and his hirelings—all the features and events of the night at the island—were of no account in comparison with the duty of conveying to Sam Hooper a knowledge of the peril by which he and Miss Allington were menaced.

He must go!

As he reached this conclusion—and he reached it in one-twentieth of the time it has taken to place its predicates upon record—Comanche Jim began his descent of the tree.

He had merely commenced it, however, when he noticed a figure which had appeared in the bushes beside the drive and was looking after the colonel and his allies, with a singular and eager intentness.

This new-comer was a total stranger to Jim,

as was readily seen by the light that streamed out of the slaughter-house upon his excited countenance.

But not a stranger to the reader.

He was, in fact, one of the hostlers.

The one of whom Vann had become suspicious.

The one who had been reported by Jed as "hanging around" the stable of Diablo.

The one Vann had mentally accused of being the poisoner of the "old dog" as well as "the puppies."

In a word, he was Wugg!

We may as well add that he had followed Weezy from the stable to see how Vann took the loss of the dogs.

Followed him secretly, of course.

For Wugg was really engaged in a little game of his own, as we shall see later.

He was far more enterprising and dangerous than ever the worst suspicions of the colonel had painted him.

"I see," he muttered, as he turned away to retrace his steps to the stable. "The colonel was about to curse me, but he didn't. He felt more than he said. When such is the case, with such a man, look out for him. He'll bite without barking. This island's no longer a safe place for me. I must accomplish this very night what I have undertaken to accomplish, and get out of this nest forever!"

If Jim did not overhear all these words, he none the less comprehended the situation.

The very looks and attitudes of the hostler told the story.

This man was Wugg.

The man who had been so foolish as to say that he had heard some one in a stall near the dogs, and thus bring himself under discussion and suspicion.

In other terms, the very man to whom the dogs owed their death.

A man with some plot and plan of his own, and not a mere tool of the colonel.

Perhaps the only man in all that crowd who had the least particle of independent daring and scheming.

In still other terms, a possible and natural ally for Comanche Jim.

In some respects, a veritable intruder, like himself.

For Jim to reach this conclusion, was to act.

"One moment, Wugg!" he called.

The hostler stopped abruptly, facing about and listening.

How startled he looked, with all his personal schemes and thoughts sending the blood into his face.

"Who speaks?" he asked, with a few steps toward the drive.

"A friend," answered Jim. "Caution! Keep out of sight. I will come to you."

CHAPTER XXVI.

WUGG'S LITTLE GAME.

THE hostler hastened to obey the suggestion of the unseen speaker, and stow himself away in the verdure bordering the drive.

He had scarcely done so when a group of butchers traversed the drive from the yard to the slaughter-house with another batch of cattle.

Waiting until they had disappeared through the doorway and scattered to their respective places of killing and dressing, Jim resumed his descent of the tree, and soon stood beside the hostler, both of them too much in shadow for their presence to be readily detected.

"Comanche Jim!" ejaculated Wugg, in a voice as full of respect as surprise.

"As you see, Wugg. Lead on to some place where I can exchange a few words with you without fear of discovery."

"This way, then. Take my arm!"

Piloted by the hostler, the couple advanced several rods under cover of the shrubbery of a crosswalk, and paused in the midst of a group of ornamental pines.

"Perhaps we are as safe here as anywhere," then said Wugg, checking his steps. "We must take care to keep an eye on the movements of the colonel and Weezy. The killers and their aids will be too busy for hours to even glance in this direction. You have something to say to me?"

"Yes, something to our mutual advantage."

"You are the man they are looking for? the man who arrived on the steer?"

"Quite right," avowed Jim. "And that is as much as to say that I came here for a purpose. In a word, to learn what is being done here."

"And you have succeeded?"

"To a very great extent. I have at least discovered the use Vann makes of the cattle he has stampeded!"

"This batch came from your drove?"

"Exactly, like so many other batches!"

"You and Sam Hooper ought to hate him, after all these losses!"

"Hate is no name, Wugg, for what we think of him! And you! I've heard enough to know that we can work together to great advantage."

Like myself, you are here for a purpose! You are playing a game of your own!"

"I—I will not deny it," avowed the hostler, "if you pledge your word of honor that you will never betray me, or turn my confidence against me!"

"I give you that pledge with pleasure, only asking a similar pledge from you," assured Jim. "We must work together. Our interests are identical. Let us be frank with each other. I want to ask you a few questions, so that we can see our way clearly. Just what is your little game here?"

The hostler hesitated for a moment, but a moment only.

"You ask me a great deal, Comanche Jim," he answered, "but I have long been familiar with you by reputation, and I know that you would not do a mean thing to save your life. Besides, you have given me your promise. I will answer frankly. I am here to run off that 'Demon Steer,' if I can get the chance. To steal it, if that word makes the point plainer!"

"To what end?"

"I've been offered five thousand dollars for it, living or dead."

"By whom?"

"By Mr. Williams, of Williams & Brother, who are the largest leaseholders of land in the Oklahoma Country. Their land lies just east of the Abilene Cattle Trail, and comprises some three hundred square miles. Their tract extends twenty miles north of the Cimarron and ten or twelve miles south of it."

"I know about where it is," returned Jim. "But what is the motive of Mr. Williams?"

"His motive? Simply to get rid of the steer. He's acting not only for himself, but also for the other large cattle-raisers; such men as Tuttle & Co., Hewins & Titus, Ford & Co., the Wyeth Cattle Company, and Burke and Martin. All of these men have had more or less annoyance from Vann and his steer, and some of them have lost hundreds of cattle. They're all down on this 'beef-mill,' as they call it, which has been established so near them. They've had several detectives here, but one or two of them disappeared mysteriously, and another was bought by Vann, and still others were detected and scared out under such circumstances that they did not dare come back again."

"And so you have undertaken to run off the steer? Why not kill him and be done with it?"

"They want to see him—to have him duly delivered. I could hardly expect them to pay five thousand dollars upon my simple declaration that I had killed the steer."

"Of course not."

"But that is not all, Jim. The very danger of the undertaking allures me. I'll run off that steer, Comanche Jim, or die!"

"I can understand you. But of course you realize the risk you are running? Vann, or almost any of his hirelings, would kill you at sight, if you were caught in the act!"

"Or even suspected of such a design—yes, even suspected! But I'm wide awake, Jim. I'm laying my plans with due care!"

"You made a botch of your explanations about the puppies, however!"

"Ah! how so?"

"Why, in saying to Weezy that you heard some one in the stall near the dogs!"

"I did not say that. I merely suggested that some one must have stolen in a moment when Mink and I were busy."

"In any case, Weezy misquoted what you did say in such a way as to bring you under suspicion. From what Vann said, I've no doubt he lays the death of the dogs at your door. You poisoned them, of course, to have them out of the way at the moment of running off the steer?"

"Of course. And you really think Vann suspects me?"

"I know it! You'll have to be very careful and cautious in all you do hereafter!"

"And very prompt!" added Wugg. "I must act this very night, or the whole thing'll be a failure!"

He shot a swift, inquiring glance into the threatening sky, and added:

"Yes, this very night, with the favor of the coming storm and darkness!"

"Good, Wugg. And good luck to you. Is there any way in which I can aid you?"

"No, thank you. The whole matter turns on my getting the steer out of the stable, and that, I think, has been thought out in such a way as to prove a success. And once off the island with him, the rest will be easy. Vann leads him readily by the nose, or even rides him, and I can do the same!"

"That don't follow, Wugg!" returned Jim, thoughtfully. "Vann has had the training of the steer from a calf, and has an authority over him which no other man can possibly possess. He knows how to handle the creature. He may even have some secrets in his management of the steer which are known only to himself, and which are absolutely essential to the animal's control. I should recommend you to be very careful in all your dealings with him!"

"Oh, I shall be, of course. But you spoke of mutual assistance. Now what can I do for you?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

A SURPRISE TO DRAWBACK.

A NUMBER of points had taken shape in Jim's mind while the preceding conversation was in progress, and he hastened to reply.

"There is at least one way in which you can oblige me, if there's nothing to forbid."

"Name it."

"I am anxious to get back to camp as soon as possible. Can I arrange for a horse?"

"Within a few minutes—yes. Mink has already gone to bed, as he is obliged to be astir between two and three in the morning, in order to assist in loading the steamer. He's not only tired as a dog, but—I have taken care to give him a dose that will help him about getting to sleep promptly and in remaining oblivious of my proceedings for several hours to come. As soon as he is fairly asleep, I'll take the risk of letting you have one of the best horses in the stable!"

"A thousand thanks, Wugg. But can you manage the matter without too much danger to yourself?"

"Oh, yes. The horse is not likely to be missed until morning, and by morning I hope to have put many miles between me and the colonel."

"I certainly should, Wugg, if I were in your place. But let me make a suggestion. Weezy and the colonel have both been to the camp this evening, and I would prefer one of the horses they used on this ride. My idea is that either of them would take me home safely and directly, notwithstanding the darkness, or even the storm which seems gathering."

"I comprehend. You shall have the colonel's favorite," returned Wugg. "He has often been over the ground between here and your camp, and is sure to make no mistake!"

"Better and better! Rest assured of my hearty gratitude," and he grasped Wugg's hand and pressed it earnestly. "And now a word about another intruder."

"You mean Drawback?"

"Yes. Do you know just what he is driving at?"

"Very nearly, which is suggested by the character of the man. But I see Vann and his intimates returning this way. We'd better beat a retreat to the stable or to some point near it."

The suggestion was acted upon, with due attention to the movements of the colonel, Weezy, and the stockmaster, who were seen to be directing their course toward the interior of the island.

"There! we're all right now," whispered the hostler, as he checked his steps in the shadow of the barn, which adjoined the stable devoted to the horses. "And now to answer your question as to why Drawback is here. He's here, I think, to discover some secret with a view to trading upon it. In other words, if he could get at some damaging facts respecting the situation of affairs here, he'd make the colonel pay for his silence, or sell his information to the authorities—little does he care which!"

"You have no great respect for him, I see!"

"Very little, Jim. To be sure, I do not know a great deal about him, but that little is not to his advantage. He's always been shiftless, lazy, and idle, and always on the lookout to pick up a few dollars in some dubious manner."

"You describe him perfectly," declared Jim thoughtfully. "Nevertheless, I believe it is our duty to assist him to his freedom, if we can do so without too seriously imperiling our own."

"Why so? What have we to do with him?"

"Only this, Wugg, that if you take the steer, and I take the favorite horse, we are to a very great extent leaving Drawback to pay the penalty. The colonel would be very angry, and might even kill his prisoner, when he learns of the losses the night is likely to bring him!"

"That's so, Jim. The colonel would naturally believe that Drawback is in some way associated with us, and would hold him responsible, in any case, especially if he cannot get hold of us, or recover his horse and steer. What you suggest then, is that we give Drawback a chance to get out of trouble?"

"Exactly—if we can!"

"Well, nothing is easier, in all probability," observed Wugg. "Of course he's bound and gagged, and all that, but there's no guard over him."

"Not even Moller?"

"No. We're too busy here to-night for Moller or any one else to be spared for any such duty."

"But where is the prisoner?"

"In the cellar of the barn—here, exactly abreast of us, and not ten yards from us. Wait a moment, just where you are. As I saw the fellow chained to the wall, I think it will not be difficult for me to release him. I'll see!"

Making his way to the three or four stone steps by which the cellar in question was reached, the hostler opened a low, narrow door, and disappeared wholly from Jim's sight and hearing.

He was absent several minutes, during which Jim could hardly master his anxiety and impatience, and then he emerged from the cellar, looking sharply around and listening.

"Caution, I say!" enjoined Wugg, addressing a crouching figure behind him. "Silence!"

"But my thanks—my everlasting gratitude shall be yours!" assured a tremulous and excited voice, which was readily recognized as that of the too enterprising Theopolus, as he came stumbling up the steps into view. "You've come to me like an angel of deliverance—"

"Cut all that, too," interrupted the hostler, sternly. "Do you wish to cost us our lives?"

"Oh, dear, no!"

"Then shut up, and stay so! Besides, you are not in the least indebted to me for your release, but to Comanche Jim, who is waiting here for you. If you'll be quiet and silent just now, and for the next half-hour, he'll appoint a day of especial thanksgiving for your benefit, I do not doubt."

"What! Comanche Jim has come for me?" gasped Theopolus, in a barely audible voice, so great was his surprise, but with a mien which showed that he was almost ready to "blubber" again, as he had been doing, with joy and relief. "Then I am indeed safe!"

"But not if you continue so noisy," returned Jim, as he cut short the effusive shaking his hand was receiving from the released man, who appeared to be still bewildered with the suddenness and the manner of his unexpected deliverance. "You must have been greatly scared to feel so deeply."

"Scared? I nearly died in despair!" assured Theopolus. "That terrible, terrible man! How can I ever thank you enough for freeing me from his clutches—"

"Well, there is a way," interrupted Jim, impatiently, "if you will allow me to be frank with you."

"Oh, name it!"

"It is simply to *keep still*, I say, and let this man and myself do the talking," declared Jim, almost savagely. "There! stand just where you are! Don't speak again till invited. I want to hear myself think a moment—in fact, say a few words more to our mutual friend here, if you will give me the chance."

"Oh, certainly—certainly!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

GOING THEIR WAYS.

COMANCHE JIM threw up his hands desperately, as if despairing of getting the last word with Theopolus, and then took Wugg by the arm and sauntered to the entrance of the stable.

All continued quiet around them, and the absence of the hostler from his post had evidently not been discovered.

"Can you give me the horse now?" asked Jim, after a glance into the interior of the stable.

"Probably. I'll see if Mink is asleep."

Wugg entered noiselessly, gliding across the floor, and ascended a staircase to the little room overhead, which he and his associate occupied together.

He was absent scarcely a minute.

"Yes, I can saddle the horse for you now," he declared, as he beckoned Jim to step inside. "Mink is in a sleep, from which the firing of a ten-pounder under his nose would not awaken him."

"Now's my time, then. But one word first. Do you think I could trust Drawback with a very important piece of business?"

"Well, you are as good a judge of that as I am. I may say, however, that I should have to be very hard up for a man before I would employ him."

"That is about my view of him, but the situation is so pressing that I am tempted to run the risk of trusting him. Let me give you an idea of the trouble."

He made known, in a few rapid sentences, the dangers menacing his employer and Miss Allington, and then said:

"If you get away safely with the steer—or without him—I hope you will make every effort to communicate with Miss Allington, and warn her of the false and treacherous nature of the dispatches and directions under which she is acting. She will doubtless make the journey hither from Caldwell in a private conveyance, and she is likely to arrive here at an early hour of the morning."

"Her—at Salt Island?"

"Yes, at this island."

"Then she must be on the road at this very moment!"

"No doubt of it. The essential, therefore, is to camp on the trail, as far north of the Cimarron as possible, in such a way that she cannot pass unseen, and to take her and her friends into good care until Mr. Sam Hooper can be communicated with."

"I get your idea perfectly," returned Wugg, "and I will take action as soon as I've finished this business of the steer."

"If you can and will do so, Mr. Wugg, you'll place us all under endless obligations!"

"Depend upon me. I'll readily risk my life to give Colonel Vann this disappointment. And now for the horse. By the way, I may as well give you the countersign now, as you may need

it in getting off the island. It is simply '*Cromwell*,' and all the rest in the regular military fashion!"

"Many thanks," said Jim. "I'll try to get off unseen, but that may not be possible. Will this word do as well for Drawback?"

"Yes—but not on the island, so long as Vann is looking for you! How will the fellow take his departure?"

"By the boat in which he came. It lies on the east shore, at the end of the fence, and he can of course make his way back to it, as he's familiar with the island."

"Then you had better instruct him to get clear of the island without being seen by any human being, and without relying in the least on the pass-word. Once on the river, let him drop down the current in silence, lying in the bottom of the boat. Should he drift upon the fellow who is patrolling the river—which isn't very likely—he can try the watchword, but with due attention to the fact that it may have been changed since the hunt for you began!"

"Ah! this is a possibility for me not to lose sight of!" returned Jim.

"Of course it is—as I was about to tell you," proceeded Wugg. "If it has been changed you must depend upon your revolver, and instruct Drawback to do likewise. If he has none, give him this, as I have another."

"Thanks," said Jim, as he secured the proffered weapon in his pocket. "And now a final word about Drawback. He and Thad Burrows, with a man named Rawdge, have lately put their heads together to rob no less a man than young Hooper. But the scheme was so full of difficulties, and had so few chances of success, that Drawback decided to tell me all about it, on very reasonable terms. There's nothing very bad about these men, and it seems to me likely that they will give me their best services in this matter of Miss Allington for a hundred dollars apiece."

"Oh, no doubt," said Wugg.

"If they will," continued Jim, "I know of no way in which the money can be more reasonably expended. Burrows lives on the Abilene Cattle Trail, in the midst of those high bluffs which characterize the north bank of the Cimarron, and Drawback, if he gets clear of the island in his boat, can be within a mile of Thad's house in three hours, by rowing with the current, as the distance is only twenty miles. Shall I trust him with the secret, and ask him to take his associates and go northward on the trail until he meets Miss Allington—?"

"I wouldn't say a word to him on the subject," interrupted Wugg, emphatically. "I doubt if the least dependence can be placed upon him. Besides, you will be at the camp in an hour, and can take measures in some other way to head off the colonel. Just think how much harm Drawback might do you, if, in getting clear of the island, he should fall into Vann's hands, and tell all he knew!"

"Enough! I see that you are right. While you are saddling the horse, I'll see Drawback started homeward, and that will be the end of the whole matter."

"All right."

As Wugg hastened toward the stalls, Comanche Jim stepped from the door—almost stumbling over Theopolus, whom he found close to the entrance.

"I—I thought you were never coming," stammered Theopolus, in some confusion.

"Oh, it's all right. Take this revolver," and Jim hastily transferred the weapon. "As you must be quite familiar with the island by this time, you can readily make your way back to your boat, despite this darkness."

"Without doubt, sir."

"Then listen."

Jim hastened to give him all the directions which had been suggested, including the countersign of the cattle-killers for the night, and then wound up with the question:

"Do you understand all this?"

"Perfectly. Good-night, and a thousand thanks to you, till we meet again."

He wrung the hand offered him, and in another moment was gone.

"Can he have been listening?" thought Jim, looking after him. "And, if so, will he play the traitor and villain?"

The footsteps of a horse just within the door of the stable fell upon his hearing, and he hastened to retrace his steps in that direction.

"Be prompt, Jim," whispered Wugg, offering him his hand, "and good luck be with you."

"The same to you," returned Jim, leaping into the saddle. "I hope to see you again soon, and hear that you have been successful."

The hostler drew the door ajar just long enough for Jim to pass out, and then all became dark behind and around him.

He had taken his bearings, however, and lost no time in riding down the drive toward the ford of the west arm of the river.

To his joy, he was not observed by the sentry on duty in that quarter, or, if he was, the horse was also recognized, or else the horseman was supposed to be the colonel, who was habitually allowed to go and come unchallenged, whatever might be the rigors applied to his follower and hirelings in this connection.

In any case, Jim was not challenged or otherwise interrupted, and in another minute he had crossed the stream and laid his course as nearly as possible in the direction from which he had come on the back of the steer.

For a few minutes he walked his horse, allowing it free rein, and watching its course with the deepest anxiety.

Then his air changed to one of joy, and he put the horse to a gallop.

"He's all right," he muttered. "He's been over the route too often not to know it even in this darkness!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

AFFAIRS AT THE CAMP.

IN the mean time, what had occurred at the camp of the cowboys, to which Comanche Jim was so anxiously proceeding?

Aroused from his peaceful and refreshing slumbers by the stampede, Sam Hooper seized his rifle and hastened from the tent, giving his best attention to the repulse of the stampede.

Bartle and his assistants had been in a like fix too often before not to throw themselves promptly into the gap between the fugitives and the rest of the drove, and in the course of half an hour they had put an end to the stampede, captured the stragglers, and concentrated the whole body into the grove again, surrounding it anew with ropes.

By the time these measures had been taken, the cattle which had escaped were miles distant.

It cost young Hooper a pang to let them go, but there was no help for it.

Better to lose a portion of the drove than the whole of it.

To undertake to arrest the fugitives would have been to give the rest a chance to scatter.

But when all was quiet again at the camp, the thoughts of the young cattle-dealer turned anew to the question of pursuit.

"Shall we see where they've gone?" he asked, as he and Bartle met at the spot where the first steer had left the corral.

"It's of no use, sir," replied Bartle. "We have taken that course when we were new to the business, and didn't know any better, but we do so no longer!"

"Why not?"

"For many reasons. To begin with, that steer will keep running until he reaches his stable, and the cattle will stick close to his heels until he has vanished from their sight!"

"And then?"

"And by that time our missing stock will be penned in some yard which has a slaughterhouse for an annex. No doubt all the cattle stampeded to-night will be dressed and on their way to market before daylight in the morning."

"And this 'beef-mill' is at Salt Island?"

"It is, sir."

"Within twelve or fifteen miles of us?"

Another affirmative.

"Then why not take out search-warrants and go and recover our cattle or the products of their slaughter?"

"We thought of doing that soon after leaving Henrietta, Mr. Hooper, but not since entering the Nation."

"And why not?"

The many difficult ways of turning a search-warrant to account," replied Bartle, with a smile. "To begin with, who is going to serve a search-warrant on such a man as Colonel Vann, with such a crowd as he has in his employ?"

"Why, you and I and all the rest of us!"

"The answer would be a volley from their rifles that'd settle our hash for all time."

"Then we'll call out a detachment of troops from Fort Reno!"

"We've thought of that, too! But there's so much red-tape involved in such affairs that we should have to call for troops this year to be sure of them next!"

"I must say, you seem discouraged, Bartle, about applying a remedy to these evils!"

"Perhaps I am so, but the road is a long and rough one to follow. What are the proofs and signs of your ownership in any of these cattle? A few brands and marks which disappear when the hide's off!"

"Then we'll levy on the hides!"

"Impossible! The hides are all dropped through a trap door in the floor of the slaughterhouse, as fast as peeled from the carcasses. And that is not all. In case of danger, how easy to erase our marks with others, our brands with other brands, or to even cut out the brands and marks and slip them into a hot fire in waiting! How often such a thing has been done! Then how will you recognize your property, and what will you levy upon? The truth is, sir, these contraband cattle-killers have got this thing down to such a fine point that you cannot tell your steer five minutes after it has left your sight!"

It was evident from the silence that succeeded that Sam saw this matter in a new light.

A dog came up to Bartle at this moment, licking his hand, and was soon followed by several others—the same dogs which had greeted Jim and Sam on their arrival in camp earlier in the day.

"Ah, we may light up now and survey the field of action," remarked Bartle, caressing the dogs. "We can do so without too great risk of receiving a shot from the enemy."

A couple of lanterns were soon lighted, and Bartle invited his employer to go and look at one of the steers which had been killed.

Sam complied, and the couple soon stood beside the fallen animal, which was one of those the red-skins had used as decoys.

"Ah, I thought so!" cried Bartle, holding his lantern nearer.

"What is it?" asked Sam.

"I thought I saw a red-skin dart away as the steer fell," continued Bartle. "Just see this horrible hook, Mr. Hooper!"

The hook in question was one having the five sharp-pointed prongs, as claws, of which mention was made in a former page.

It was covered with blood, as was the side of the animal which had been lacerated by it.

"That is the sort of tool used at the critical moment by the stampedeers," observed Bartle, as he held it up to the view of his employer. "You can readily imagine how a steer jumps at the moment he finds such a thing as that tearing his side!"

"Ah! that is to give the cattle a start, the necessary impetus?"

"Exactly, and these two red-skins have never made a failure of it yet."

"But who are these red-skins?"

"A couple of Cherokees in the service of Colonel Vann—his 'dogs of war,' in fact."

"Did you see them to-night?"

"One of them only, and it is very rarely that we see either."

"Did they creep into the grove?"

"No doubt, sir."

"But why didn't you have the dogs on the watch all the evening, with a view to keeping these red-skins out?"

"We used to take that course, but it didn't work. We simply lost our dogs."

"How lost them?"

"Why the thieves would have a dose ready, and it was impossible to keep our dogs so well fed that they wouldn't touch a choice morsel from the intruders. We've lost all our dogs repeatedly within twenty minutes of the moment when they announced by barking the approach of the red-skins. These losses were caused sometimes in one way and sometimes in another, but usually by poison."

Again Sam was silent, and the rays of the lantern which fell upon his face showed that he was gloomy and annoyed.

"All we have gained, therefore, by having dogs, is hardly worth a mention," continued Bartle. "Their only use is negative. If they do not bark, we know that no one is prowling within shooting distance. If they do bark, and rush out onto the prairie on a tour of inquiry, they soon become silent, and we see no more of them until we find their dead bodies."

Sam turned away from the dead steer in visible disgust.

"Let's go back to the tent," he proposed, with a shiver. "I see that your pathway through the Nation is much more of a path of thorns than I had supposed."

"We must go as far as the four cottonwoods to see why Comanche Jim hasn't come in from his post," remarked Bartle. "He ought to have been here long ago! Perhaps he has got into trouble!"

He led the way to the group of trees in question, but it threw no light upon Jim's whereabouts.

The only certainty arrived at was that he had vanished.

"A disgusting business!" muttered Sam after a few further questions and answers. "If I ever recover my peace of mind, it will be when I've run Colonel Vann under—or when he has done that much for me!"

And with this he strode toward the tent in gloomy silence.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE SCHEME OF THE RED-SKINS.

ON a camp-stool at the door of the tent, sat old Filkins, the cook, with a countenance which attested that he was far from possessing his usual calmness.

"There's too much of this same sort of sameness," he growled, in a voice of condensed wrath. "Too much cattle-stealing, too much night-work, too much broken rest and worry. If that blamed steer is not soon killed, I shall have to steer my boat in some new direction. If things go on as they've been going lately, I shall have to lease a berth in an overshot wheel for quiet!"

He looked keenly around, as if to be sure that he was not under observation, and hastily elevated a full-grown bottle over his mouth, and kept it there as long as it could dispense the liquid of his predilections.

"There's only one comfort," he resumed, as he arose and tossed the empty bottle into a box which stood just within the door of the tent "and that is that we're rid of the meandering reprobates for two or three days at least. We

can take things easy and be quite at our leisure until they're ready for another batch o' cattle!"

He yawned violently, stretching his hands over his head, and stepped to one side of the tent to note the whereabouts of the cowboys, and assure himself of the progress that was being made in setting things to rights.

As he did so, a dark face peered around the opposite corner of the tent at him.

This face belonged to one of the two Cherokees who were so intimately associated with Colonel Vann in his nefarious operations—to Pepper.

How wicked the fellow looked.

How crafty and jubilant.

It could have been seen at a glance that he was there for some murderous purpose.

He and Salt, in fact, had entered upon their attempt to suppress Sam Hooper, in accordance with the colonel's wishes.

The red-skin had in his hand a long slender earthen jar, with a neck and mouth nearly as big as its body.

From this jar he was scattering upon the ground some article of food resembling a beef-stew, and which may have been such.

Taking care to keep out of the rays of the lantern hanging against the upright pole supporting the front of the tent, the intruder scattered some of the contents of the jar sufficiently near the entrance for it to attract the attention of any of the dogs which might appear in that quarter.

Then he withdrew from that point, retracing his steps to the other end of the tent, but scattering a trail of meat beside it as he went, in order, as was evident, to entice the dogs in that direction.

And here, at the left rear corner of the tent, stood the second Cherokee—the one answering to the name of Salt.

What the couple were doing, will be readily divined by the reader.

They were scattering poisoned meat in such a way as to make sure of silencing all the dogs in the camp, as soon as they should return from the outing which had been occasioned by the stampedeers.

These red-skins were adepts in this business.

They had hung about the camp enough to know that these dogs usually moved about in a pack, and could safely count upon the probability that the whole group would be at hand, at the moment when the poisoned meat should be discovered by any one of them.

"Is there enough of it?" whispered Salt, as his associate emptied the balance of the stew on the ground between them.

"Enough for ten times as many—if they'd divide it properly," answered Pepper, in a tone as guarded as that of his companion. "But some will get more, and others less, so that we must increase both quantity and strength!"

He held up to view a bottle of whisky he had stolen from the rear of the tent, by passing under the canvas, while Filkins was busy with his thoughts at the entrance.

"Mountain dew, eh?" queried Salt, with an eager scenting and a grimace.

"The regular essence o' moonshine, returned Pepper, with a corresponding jubilation. "Let's get back to our hiding-place!"

Gliding away under cover of bushes and other objects which came in their way, the couple were soon clear of the camp.

Proceeding a hundred yards further, to the edge of a small patch of woods, they threw themselves upon the brow of a grassy knoll, and hastened to open the bottle, Pepper producing a corkscrew for that purpose.

To smell of the contents was attraction, and to taste cohesion!

"What do you think of it?" asked Salt, when both had taken liberal drams.

"I think it is excellent."

We mention this exchange of opinions merely to show the status of the couple.

While actually engaged in a scheme of violence and murder, they were so little affected by that sort of work that they could give their attention to a consideration of the qualities of their stolen whisky!

As has so often been said of the Indians, these men had learned of civilization nothing but its vices.

While intelligent enough to possess a great store of information, including the vulgarities of the conversation they were in the habit of hearing, they were nevertheless so heartless, and so indifferent to human life and suffering, that they were revoltingly cruel and brutal.

A queer type of men, whether red or white, but one that is common enough in Indian Territory.

From the point to which they had retired, the red-skins had the light of the tent directly ahead of them, and were able to see with their glasses every movement in that quarter.

What they could not see—and that was everything outside of that small circle of illumination—they could divine by their sense of hearing.

"We shall not have long to wait," remarked Pepper, as he passed the bottle to his comrade, after taking a second drink from it. "They seem to have recovered their cattle, and made all snug again at the grove!"

"If so, they'll soon be back at the tent—at least Hooper will," returned Salt, after he had given the bottle renewed attention. "Catch him worrying himself as to whether he has a few more steers or less!"

A considerable interval of silence succeeded. Pepper drank in this interval two or three times, and seemed singularly abstracted.

"I've got an idea, Salt," he finally said.

"I saw as much. What is it?"

"A hundred dollars isn't a great deal of money, after all, and even a barrel of whisky will not last forever!"

"True—when you and I are its near neighbors!"

"We can do better than to kill Hooper," pursued Pepper. "We'll take him alive, Salt! Don't you remember what the colonel said yesterday, namely, that he'd gladly give ten thousand dollars to have Sam Hooper in his hands?"

"Yes, I remember it. What was his idea at that moment?"

"Why, to have Hooper at his mercy, to control the girl through him, to torture both of them, when the girl is once in his hands!"

"Then why did he offer us a hundred apiece to kill him?"

"In the first place, because it's cheaper. And in the second, because he didn't see any way of taking Hooper alive without losing several men in the operation."

"But you see a way?"

"Yes. I have a drug here which will do the business. I will slip into the tent and hold it to his nose as soon as he is asleep."

"And he'll then be helpless? Nothing could wake him?"

"Absolutely nothing—for several hours at least. By taking this course, we fall heirs to all the money he may have upon his person. There's no telling how much—possibly fifty thousand dollars!"

Salt repeated the words with a countenance which is seldom seen—it was so full of greed, wonder, and energy.

"To simply kill him, and leave all that money behind us," pursued Pepper, "would be the act of a fool. But we are not that kind of a spoon. First we pass him from sleep into unconsciousness. Then we take him away with us and go through him. That done, we'll sell him to Vann for a round sum, or force him to pay a few thousand additional for his freedom!"

"Why, he's a mine then—a regular mine!"

"Better than any mine of gold and silver we shall ever discover, Salt! I am glad you see the point. Did it never occur to you that Vann has paid us poorly, very poorly indeed, for all we have done for him?"

"It certainly has."

"We're simply 'Injuns' in his sight! He makes less of us than of his horse. He takes it for granted that we're ready to risk life for a drink of whisky. I'm sick of his whole treatment of us!"

"So am I, Pepper."

"Then let us wake up at last. Let's see if we can't do something for ourselves!"

"I'm with you, Pepper."

"Why, just think what we've done for that man!" cried Pepper, his voice growing more and more bitter. "He never would have made a success of his steer if it had not been for us. Neither he nor any of his men can get up a single successful stampede without us. And yet he asks us to commit a murder for a hundred dollars and a barrel of whisky."

"True, Pepper—only too true!"

"But we're not that sort of chromo, are we, Salt?"

"Not any."

"Then let us make an end of this whole business," proposed Pepper. "It's a mere question of a few days or weeks when that man'll reach the end of his rope—where there'll probably be a noose! Let's be wise in time! We must turn this Hooper business to account, and take a change of air. For my part, Salt, I'd like to take a trip to New York, and perhaps cross the ocean to London and Paris! What I've read of those great cities haunts me! I dream of them waking and sleeping! If we're ever going to be anything but the 'Injuns' of this vulgar robber, why not make a handsome 'raise' during the next forty-eight hours, and leave the Nation?"

"I'm as eager to go as you can possibly be," returned Salt. "All you have to do is to show me how it can be done. But hush! There are the dogs, with Hooper and Bartle!"

The two Cherokees placed their glasses to their eyes, and watched and listened.

CHAPTER XXXI.

HALF A LOAF BETTER THAN NONE.

THE dogs of Bartle and his associates had appeared in front of the tent, and were eagerly following the scent which had assailed their nostrils—that of the poisoned meat.

"They're all there," muttered Salt, after counting a moment—"just as you expected!"

"Yes. They'll all get a bite, and then go for a drink," returned Pepper. "The brook being some distance away, they'll not be able to return!"

"May they not be missed too soon?"

"It is possible. We must run the risk. Whether they're missed or not, will depend upon how closely they are looked after. As at least one-half of the cowboys are on the watch beside the cattle, we may hope that the dogs will be supposed to be with them."

While these observations were being exchanged by the red-skins, Sam Hooper entered the tent, of which Filkins had resumed possession, and threw himself upon a camp lounge.

What with his excitement and exertion of the preceding half-hour, in addition to the fatigue and sleeplessness of the previous night, he was thoroughly exhausted.

Filkins was prompt to notice the pallor and weariness of the young cattle-dealer, and hastened to offer refreshments, which were accepted.

Bartle had returned to the tent at the express request of Sam, who desired to pass in review with him various events and occurrences of the journey from Henrietta.

"Strange where Jim is!" observed the cowboy, as he dropped into the rustic chair to which his employer motioned him. "Can he have encountered that red-skin I uncovered as I endeavored to stop the stampede by shooting several of the foremost steers?"

"If so, it has probably been a bad encounter for the red-man," returned Sam, with a smile. "You say there were two shots fired near the cottonwoods, in which Jim had taken up his quarters. I think those two shots were fired by him."

"In that case, why didn't we see the red-skin's body?" asked Bartle.

"The shot may have missed," replied Sam, "or the body of the red-skin may have been carried off by his own people."

"That is indeed likely," said the cowboy. "But speculation is useless. The essential is that we may regard Jim as abundantly able to take care of himself. If he has not returned yet, it is simply because he has business elsewhere."

"That's a very good way of looking at it," declared Sam. "Jim has been in too many tight places without getting stuck in them for us to worry about him until we have some real cause to do so. You look tired, Filkins," added Sam, turning to the cook. "I don't see that your services will be required further. You had better turn in."

Filkins was glad to avail himself of this suggestion, and was soon stowed away for the night, as was announced by his heavy breathing.

During the balance of the evening Sam and Bartle discussed the situation, with the various facts and events from which it had resulted, and it was getting late when at length the cowboy arose to take a turn around the camp, and assure himself that everything was as it should be.

"I shall remain on the watch," remarked Sam, as he also arose. "I'm not exactly worried about Jim, but I shall not turn in until he returns, or we have word from him."

"Of course I will keep an eye in this quarter, from time to time," said Bartle. "It's not likely the enemy will intrude, either to steal, or for personal violence. Filkins has missed a few supplies, including some pertaining to the 'bottle department,' but even those scowling red-skins have made no effort to kill us, or even do us bodily harm."

"Naturally not," returned Sam. "They've no desire to kill the goose which lays their golden egg! Let me know promptly if you see any signs of further trouble."

When Bartle had retired, Sam increased the light in the tent, so as to suggest to any possible watchers that he was stirring, or that he had company, and then he opened his valise and took out a large package of money.

"Pity I've not yet found occasion to turn that dynamite to account," he muttered, as his gaze encountered the explosive. "But I'll set 'em flying with it yet, if they're not careful."

Locking the valise, he placed it under the head of the lounge, and then stepped to the entrance of the tent, with the package of money in his hand, which he held behind him.

Watching and listening a moment, he came to the conclusion that no one was intruding.

"I'll bury it in the center of the tent," he said to himself, as he retraced his steps in that direction. "It will be safer there than in my valise, or on my person, and Bartle'll take charge of it, if anything happens to me."

The money was soon buried, and the spot disguised by placing over it various camp utensils.

This measure was not taken, however, because Sam had the least expectation of an intrusion, but simply as one of those precautions he had been accustomed to take ever since his business grew to such an extent as to force him frequently to carry large sums of money.

This point off his mind, Sam returned to his lounge, where he placed himself in an easy attitude, with his hands under his head, and gave himself up to the thoughts and reflections crowding upon him.

"There! I ought to have written Edna!" he mentally ejaculated, with the liveliness of a sud-

den reproach. "And telegraphed, too! But we've been in such an uproar here ever since I struck the Cimarron, that I've hardly had a chance to turn a thought elsewhere. I'll send a telegram as soon as the agent at Kingfisher Creek Station is stirring, and a long letter by the very next mail."

His thoughts once turned in this direction, in the quietude and solitude of that hour and place, a flood of gentle reveries invaded his soul, with such a soothing influence that it would have been singular if he had not yielded to them.

In a word, he was soon in the soundest and sweetest of slumbers, as was natural to his years and hopes, despite the passing annoyances of his situation.

This fact had scarcely been announced by a breathing so heavy as to threaten to deepen to a snore, when Pepper crawled into the tent by the same route he had taken a couple of hours earlier to secure the bottle of whisky he and Salt had been discussing.

Crouching and half-creeping, the red-skin reached the side of the sleeper, over whose face he held a few moments a sponge saturated with chloroform.

Then the intruder inclined his ear and listened alike to the respiration of young Hooper and to the beating of his heart.

"He's all right, Salt," he whispered through the silence to his companion, who had appeared on all-fours at the entrance.

Seizing Sam's valise, which he slung across his shoulder in the same position in which the owner was accustomed to carry it, Pepper arose to his feet, as did Salt, who hastened to enter the tent noiselessly and join his confederate.

Laying hold of the sleeper, the intruders bore him away between them, and promptly vanished in the direction of the wooded knoll where they had been watching and waiting.

It was not till they were at least half a mile from the tent, and in the midst of such a configuration of the landscape as to be shut out of view completely from the camp of the cowboys, that the two red-skins laid their unconscious burden upon the ground, lighted a piece of candle, and proceeded to "go through him."

What a disappointment was that which befell them!

The pockets of the young cattle-dealer netted only a few dollars and a handful of change.

"As I supposed, the money's in his valise," muttered Pepper, as he hastened to unsling that article from his shoulder. "Hold your light nearer, Salt. No matter about the key. I'd as soon rip it open with a knife."

He suited the action to the word, and now the disappointment of the two villains turned to fury.

The cakes of dynamite were the only treasures that rewarded their search, with the exception of a few toilet effects, and the explosive received all the less attention from the fact that they did not know what it was.

"The beggar! the wandering vagabond!" cried Pepper, in a fury. "Where can his money be?"

"Perhaps he didn't have any," suggested Salt, with forced calmness. "He only came down here to investigate these stampedes, and had no occasion to bring a great pile of money with him."

Pepper stared a moment at the motionless figure of the cattle-dealer, with an air of wrath and disgust.

"I'm tempted to kill him!" he then muttered, laying his hand on his knife.

"Chatter! Don't be foolish!" enjoined Salt. "If he hasn't any money on his person, he certainly has a plenty where he can raise it. We've only to take him away with us."

The red-skin arose, looking around and listening, and gave utterance to a call like that with which Vann had communicated with Jed elsewhere early in the evening.

A similar cry came in reply, from a point not a hundred yards distant.

"There! Guss is waiting for us, with the horses, you see," resumed Salt. "There's no occasion to get desperate. We've got Hooper himself, and that's the essential!"

"That's true, after all," returned Pepper, growing calmer. "We can get a good sum of money from the colonel for him!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

BAD—BUT MIGHT BE WORSE.

RESUMING possession of their prisoner, the two red-skins hurried away with him in the direction of their waiting ally.

They had arrived near enough to see him, as he stood waiting expectantly, lantern in hand—which he had just lighted—in the edge of the bushes lining a water-course, when the cheery neighing of a horse suddenly disturbed the silence, from a point ten rods ahead of them.

Evidently a new-comer was at hand!

Was he friend or foe?

The mere raising of this question was enough to startle the red-skins.

"Lively!" enjoined Pepper, quickening his

pace toward his waiting ally, who involuntarily turned the rays of his lantern upon them. "Jump into the saddle, and I'll pass him up to you!"

"Oh, it's some of our people," put in Guss—as he had been called—turning his light upon the approaching horse. "Why, it's the colonel's! But where is his rider?"

The approaching horse being now near enough to be recognized, the red-skins dismissed their apprehensions.

"He can't be far distant," said Pepper. "But hasten, Salt! I can't hold this man all night! He's heavy as lead! Lively!"

"Hark!" cried Salt. "I hear footsteps! Some one's approaching behind us! Look out!"

The footsteps increased suddenly to a rush, and a figure bounded into the midst of the group, seizing the lantern of Guss with one hand and leveling a revolver with the other.

"Git!" thundered a stern voice. "And be quick about it!"

The new-comer was, of course, Comanche Jim.

He had arrived just near enough to the camp to recognize the light gleaming from the tent, when his horse's attention, and then his own, was attracted to the scene Guss and the red-skins presented.

To realize the situation of affairs was the work of an instant.

Slipping to the ground, he allowed his horse to fix the attention of the enemy, as related, while he crept up to them behind the fringe of bushes, in such a way as to avoid being seen until he had noted their numbers, and was close upon them.

The result can be anticipated.

The two Cherokees were only too glad not to receive a bullet as a reward for what they were doing, and by a few quick steps they gained the backs of the horses in waiting for them, and dashed away at a smart gallop, with a mien which attested to a fear that Comanche Jim would be less generous as soon as he should discover who was their unconscious victim.

Their example was followed by Guss, and he in turn by the colonel's riderless horse, so that in another moment Jim was left alone with his insensible employer.

A brief examination of Sam satisfied Jim how the case stood, and he hastened to take the insensible young cattle-dealer on his back and bear him toward the camp.

He had not gone far before he encountered Bartle and Hammick, with two or three others, who had heard the neighing of the colonel's horse and had come forth to see what it signified.

The astonishment of the group at recognizing Comanche Jim, and especially the unconscious man on his shoulder, has no need of description.

"Why, where've you been?" exclaimed Hammick.

"And where has Sam been?" cried Bartle.

"You'll probably be enlightened soon," answered Jim, as he relinquished his burden to two of his cowboys. "The essential is that I happened to encounter the rascals in time to take Sam from them!"

"From whom?" cried Hammick.

"These two infernal Cherokees, and one of their associates. They've evidently crept into the tent and chloroformed Sam, for they were just in the act of getting away with him."

The tent was soon reached, and young Hooper was placed upon the lounge from which he had been taken by his abductors.

"Give him plenty of fresh air!" exclaimed Jim. "That's about all we can do for him, if he has been heavily chloroformed, as is to be supposed. I do not see how the red-skins have crept in upon him. He must have been asleep."

"As Filkins is now, in fact," returned Bartle, indicating the cook, who was still oblivious of all that was transpiring around him. "He told me he should watch for your return, Jim, but sleep doubtless surprised him."

"And so the red-skins crept in unseen? But has there been no alarm? Where are your dogs?"

"I had missed them just as I heard the neigh of a horse—yours, I suppose. Have none of you seen the dogs?"

"Not for an hour or two," answered Hammick.

"Then hunt 'em up."

The search was entered upon, with lanterns and torches, but for a few minutes without results, no response being made to the calls and whistlings of the cowboys, or even to their hurried quests hither and thither.

Then a dead dog was found midway between the tent and the brook, and this find threw an instant and startling light upon the problem under elucidation.

The dogs had been poisoned!

A further search resulted in the finding of the bodies of the other missing animals, which lay scattered in various positions between the first dog and the spot where they had all gone for water.

Bartle smiled bitterly at the report of these discoveries was brought to him.

"They are at their old tricks, it seems," he

ejaculated. "Pity I couldn't have arrived a few minutes sooner."

"They've carried off Sam's valise, I think—dynamite and all," remarked Bartle, looking under the lounge.

"Then a fine roll of money has gone with it!" cried Jim, excitedly.

"Hardly," said Bartle, taking cognizance of the changes Sam had made in the disposition of affairs within the tent. "Sam told me he should bury his money hereabouts as soon as I left him."

The speaker made a brief investigation at the spot indicated, adding:

"And he has done so!"

"Then we've only the valise and dynamite to look for," said Jim, "and the search for that need not be a long one. It cannot be far from where you met me, or somewhere in the same direction. Go, all of you!"

He retained Bartle by a gesture, and waited in patience until all the rest had vanished.

"Here's a fine kettle of fish, Bartle," he then resumed. "That Vann has sent a lot of decoy telegrams to Edna Allington, and she is now so far on her way toward Salt Island that she is expected to arrive there at an early hour of the morning!"

Bartle seemed literally stunned at this intelligence.

"And Sam in such a fix!" added Jim. "Of course he will come out all right later, if you take good care of him. But about that girl, Bartle? You see at a glance that there is only one course for me to pursue, and that must be taken promptly. Stir up Feilkins, and let him go for our two best horses, both to saddle!"

The cook was duly aroused and dispatched upon his errand.

"You're going to meet Miss Allington, then?" queried Bartle.

"Of course. With two horses, so that I can change from one to the other, I hope to meet the young lady before she can fall into the hands of Colonel Vann or any of his hirelings."

"You'll need lights, Jim," said Bartle, looking from the tent. "It's getting awful dark, and the rain's setting in, with a high old wind!"

"Well, get me your best lantern, and give me a rifle in a water-proof. I think I can pick my way to Kingfisher Stage Station, and there I'll try to stir up the telegraph along the whole line."

I will at least leave it wide awake behind me, so that you may look for news of Miss Allington as soon as I meet her, or sooner."

Bartle nodded understandingly.

"And now take good note, old fellow, of what I say to you," resumed Jim. "As soon as you can get Sam out of his sleep, you'll tell him why I have gone, and where. But that is not all. I want you to tell Sam to be at the mouth of Salt Creek as early in the morning as possible. The spot in question is just below Salt Island, and from it the buildings on the island are more or less visible. Tell Sam to take all the men he can with him. As Miss Allington is traveling by a private conveyance, she is almost certain to leave the trail at Huckleberry Stage Station, as she saves a great corner by so doing. Should I fail to communicate with her before she leaves the trail, it is more than possible that I will miss her altogether, and that she will go straight into the hands of Vann at the island!"

"The very possibility is enough to make Sam go wild," muttered the cowboy.

"If I do miss her on the trail, however," added Jim, "I shall look for her at Vann's or in that direction, and that is why I want Sam to be within call. Can you make all this plain to him?"

"Perfectly—perfectly."

"Then I see my way clear. I'll send messenger after messenger to the mouth of Salt Creek, as fast as there are any developments in the case, and I shall feel strong in the thought that you will all be within striking distance, if I should have to 'beard the lion in his den!' Ah, here comes Filkins."

"The horses'll be here in a minute, sir," cried the cook, entering briskly. "But what a the sudden start! How strange—"

"Never mind that, Filkins, but give me a little lunch to take with me!"

"Yes, sir! In a jiffy!"

The lunch had been put up, the horses had arrived, and Jim had finished his seventh or eighth batch of final instructions to Bartle, when Hammick and the rest of the cowboys made their appearance.

"We've found it," announced the old miner, exhibiting the valise. "It has been cut open, but is still serviceable. We found the dynamite on the ground beside it, and have replaced it."

Jim took the bag, and stowed away in it the supplies with which he had been furnished.

"What! dynamite with your lunch, sir?" cried Filkins, in astonishment.

"Yes, I'll take the dynamite, too," declared Jim, as he drew the strap of the valise over his shoulder. "Here, Fil, give me a string to tie around the bag, as this slit is rather too large for safety."

The string was quickly in place, and Comanche Jim, lantern in hand, leaped into the saddle, without appearing to notice the heavy

spatters of rain, or the furious blast of wind, which greeted him.

"Remember, Bartle!" was his final injunction. "Get Sam on his feet as soon as you can, and be at the mouth of Salt Creek early in the morning and as many in number as possible!"

And with this he dashed away at a gallop.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

TAKING A HAND IN THE GAME.

BY now giving our attention to Theopolus Drawback, we shall see that he was in no wise worthy of the kindness which had been shown him.

The undying gratitude he had promised was scarcely skin deep.

After leaving Wugg and Comanche Jim, he retired a few rods—barely far enough to pass out of sight—and then he halted, looking back at the stable, and virtually constituting himself a spy for the men who had released him.

In this position, he remained motionless until Jim had ridden away on Vann's horse, as related, and then an audible chuckle escaped him.

"Of course they're playing a game of their own," he muttered, with his glances on the slaughter-house, and his hearing alert to every sound around him. "I must do likewise, and so must every other man, or else go under. It's a world of games, and nothing else."

He resumed progress, but with a face and mien which did not at all reflect the anxiety with which his liberators had armed him and given him the pass-word, with all necessary directions for leaving the island.

Nevertheless, he kept moving, and at the same time maintained a strict watch upon his surroundings, giving especial attention to the movements of the colonel and his intimates (Weezy and the stockmaster), who were still looking for the intruder from whom they had received such a scare, namely, Comanche Jim.

Having utilized all his previous visits to Salt Island to their fullest extent, Theopolus had become pretty thoroughly acquainted with its characteristics, and he experienced no difficulty in retracing his steps to the fence which has been repeatedly mentioned.

This fence was a post-and-rail, somewhat higher than usual, and its use was to separate the lawns and gardens of Vann from the pastures in which he kept his cattle.

It ran in a nearly direct line from one side of the island to the other.

Having once struck it, therefore, which he did not far east of the slaughter-house, Theopolus had only to refer to it occasionally to make his way to its eastern extremity, as intense as was the darkness.

On the shore of the island were a few trees and bushes, the most of them such as flourish best near rivers, and here, in the double shadow of night and vegetation, Theopolus expected to find the boat from which he had landed not long after dark.

To his horror, it was gone!

"Hey, there!" he cried, in dismay. "You haven't deserted me?"

"No," came the answer from a point several rods away, on the surface of the river. "Here we are!"

"What are you doing there?"

"Simply lying at anchor and waiting for you. 'Keep quiet a moment, and we'll put in to the fallen tree and get you!'"

The speaker was Thad Burrows, and the "we" he had uttered included Rawdige, the third of the three inseparables.

The couple had come to the island with Drawback, and had been waiting anxiously for him.

As he spoke, Thad drew up a stone which was serving as an anchor, and Rawdige at the same time made such use of the oars as to place the boat alongside the fallen trunk of a tree which lay half on the bank and half in the river, offering an excellent footing for the business on hand.

The boat was no sooner in the desired position than Drawback placed himself in its stern, but without letting go of the stump of a limb which had assisted him in the operation.

"Quiet a moment," he said. "I've something to say!"

"I should think as much," growled Burrows. "We've been scared nearly to death!"

"How scared?"

"Why there has been a crowd of people scouring up and down the shore—"

"They didn't see you?"

"No. We crawled away into the bushes on our hands and knees, and were so fortunate as to escape their notice. The moment they went away, however, we thought it wise to pull off in the boat to where you found us."

"How long did they bother you?"

"Only a couple of minutes. They seemed to be looking for somebody in particular, and to accept the presence of the boat as a hint that 'the intruder' landed from it. We naturally supposed that you had been seen and captured!"

"And that's just what's the matter," declared Theopolus complacently. "I was seized, bound hand and foot, and thrown into a dark cellar, with a promise of being murdered in the morning!"

"And you've escaped!"

"Or been released by friendly hands, which amounts to the same thing."

"Well, what have you learned?" pursued Thad, after listening a moment.

"The place is about what we supposed only more so," replied Drawback. "The colonel is the head of a gang of stampedeers and cattle-stealers—the very gang which has been carrying on affairs in such a high-handed fashion during the last few months. He is the man who runs the 'Demon Steer,' which interesting quadruped I've had the pleasure of seeing in such close quarters that I barely missed dangling on one of its horns! There's a slaughter-house here that would not shame New York or Chicago."

"Where we see that door, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Are they butchering now?"

"You'd think so, if you could take a peep through that doorway. There are twenty-five or thirty men in that building, all as busy as bees—"

"Then why don't we see more light?"

"Simply because there are no windows. The building was evidently designed for night-work just such as is going on at this moment."

"But the beef—what becomes of that?"

"It is taken down the river on a stern-wheel steamer that only draws two feet of water, and is transferred to the cars at Red Fork, a terminus at the junction of the Cimarron and Arkansas!"

"A soft thing, sure enough!" commented Rawdige. "The colonel is in a position to defy competition!"

"And distance it, too, to judge by the gait of that decoy steer!" said Theopolus. "You ought to have seen him on the homestretch, with about three hundred cattle behind him! This batch came from the Hooper drove, which has got as far north as Kingfisher Creek, or further."

"But, how is the thing done?" queried Rawdige.

"Nobody knows, except the colonel and his assistants, but it certainly is done, and on a scale that is simply astounding. Of course the colonel has to pay his killers and stealers good wages, and I must say that they hang together like a pot of glue. They have their passwords, and four or five men are now patrolling the river to prevent all intrusion!"

"Ah, that explains something that occurred a few minutes ago," said Rawdige. "A boat drifted past a few rods outside of us in such silence that we should not have known of its presence if the man in it hadn't happened to cough!"

"That's one of these watchers," exclaimed Theopolus. "But they've watched in vain, for once!"

"How so?"

"Why, there has been a man here to-night who'll soon tune their fiddle for them—the very man who has charge of the drove they've been stampeding—"

"What! Comanche Jim?"

"Yes, Comanche Jim! And the strangest thing about the affair is that he arrived on the back of the 'Demon Steer!' If I hadn't seen him with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it!"

"Why, how can he have got there?" asked Rawdige.

"Only by making a resolute run and jump, and catching on as the steer passed him. And even then I don't see how he dared do it. But since he *did* do it, I understand what he means by it. He must have resolved to track that steer to his nest, and I must say he's done it. He knows all that is going on here. He'll have pay for his best cattle—for all the trouble Vann has made him. He has even found an ally here, a hostler, who has let him have one of the colonel's horses, and he has just ridden away quite at his leisure!"

"Good for him!" commented Thad. "He's the one who set you free, I suppose?"

"Well, yes—he and the hostler referred to," acknowledged Theopolus. "You will see from all this, that there are going to be high old times here very soon. The game Vann has been playing is nearly played out. Comanche Jim will doubtless close this contraband 'beef-mill' within the next forty-eight hours. But we're not to be left entirely out in the cold in all these deals and transactions. No, boys. We're going to take the winning hand in the game!"

The manner of Theopolus was so earnest and significant that the attention of his associates redoubled.

"Just tell us how, that's all," returned Burrows.

"As I've indicated," resumed Drawback, "Jim is ahead in all that concerns business. But Vann is ahead in something a thousand times more important—that is to say, as a suitor for the hand of Edna Allington!"

"How can t at be?" asked Rawdige. "You told us yourself that Sam Hooper is engaged to

marry the girl, while Vann has been driven out of her sight forever!"

"But Vann has now turned the tables, as you shall hear," explained Theopolus. "Listen! When Vann learned that Sam had left Wichita for the Nation, what did he do?"

"Set a trap for him, as we did, perhaps," answered Thad dryly.

"Yes, and not only that, but he sent a decoy telegram or two, and the result is that Miss Allington is now on her way down the trail, and will be here not long after daylight in the morning."

"Well, that is a turnabout!" ejaculated Burrows. "Do you mean that the girl is coming to this island?"

"To this very spot, for the simple reason that she believes her lover to be here, in accordance with the lies Vann has sent her!"

"But will she travel on such a night as this?" asked Rawdige—"in all this darkness, not to speak of the storm which is about to burst upon us?"

"Travel? Is there anything on earth that can keep a girl away from the man she loves, when she believes that man to be lying at the point of death? Go away, Rawdige! It's easy to see that you've never made the acquaintance of any other woman than your mother!"

"And so the girl's coming here—straight to the arms of the colonel?" muttered Burrows, with an air of the deepest interest, but also with the air of being unable to see how he could turn this fact to his own use and advantage. "What a pity that she can't be enlightened in time in regard to the situation!"

"Exactly, Thad, and it is here that our little game comes into play," declared Theopolus. "The colonel would sooner lose every dollar he has in the world than lose the girl, and the same may be said of Sam Hooper. And such being the case, all we have to do is to come between the rivals—to seize and hold the girl, in fact—and we can obtain an awful pile of money for her from one or the other!"

The hearers both started in such a way as to show that they were electrified.

"The scheme is too splendid to be realized!" exclaimed Thad, regretfully.

"Not a bit of it!" assured Theopolus. "Listen, again! The girl is sure to have a driver who knows the country. Ten to one, therefore, this driver will leave the Abilene Cattle Trail three miles this side of Huckleberry Stage Station, at the great bend, where there is a trail branching toward Turkey Creek."

"Yes, that's likely," assented Burrows.

"What we have to do, then, is to act promptly," continued Theopolus. "On the other shore of this river we have three horses in waiting—the same that brought us here—at the point where we have for some days past had this boat concealed. We'll now cross the river and mount, scattering to our respective destinations—you, Thad, to go straight home and prepare for the girl's reception; Rawdige to ride to the Buffalo Spring Stage Station, to make sure of the girl, if I should miss her; and I will hurry at full gallop to Turkey Creek Bridge, to intercept her at that crossing."

"But what am I to tell her, if she falls into my hands instead of yours?" asked Rawdige, in a strangely excited whisper.

"Simply that you have been sent by Sam Hooper to meet her, and that you will conduct her to him," returned Theopolus.

"And then take her to Thad's?"

"Exactly. I shall follow the Turkey Creek Trail to Huckleberry Station. If I do not meet her, I can make inquiries at that point, and am not likely to arrive at Thad's more than half an hour or an hour behind her, during which time you can keep her quiet by any sort of taffy that may occur to you. Is it all understood and agreed?"

"Perfectly, Theopolus," replied Burrows. "Let go of that limb, and Rawdige'll have us across the river instanter."

Drawback complied with the suggestion, and in another moment the boat was on its way swiftly to the eastern shore of the Cimarron.

"You see this whole matter turns upon prompt action," added Theopolus. "As we shall be the first to meet Miss Allington, we're sure to trap her."

It looked that way, sure enough.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WUGG AND THE STEER.

THERE came a swift, strange, whirling gust of wind over the island and river, bringing a dash of great drops of rain which spattered like shot.

How wild the night had become!

It seemed high time to Colonel Vann to give up the fruitless search with which he had wearied himself, and he led the way toward his house, asking Weezy and the stockmaster to accompany him and take a drink and a bite with him.

"It seems that the fellow has found a burrow here from which I cannot so easily dislodge him," he muttered, with ill-concealed annoy-

ance. "Possibly he may have bought some of my men, and they may be hiding him. I shall have to take time and daylight to get to the root of the matter. Meanwhile, I hope you will both be as keen and watchful as if life were at stake."

"Kriss and I do not propose to own ourselves defeated just yet, sir," said Weezy. "We'll devote the whole night to the hunt, if necessary. It's very awkward and annoying to feel that the eyes of such a man as Comanche Jim are watching all our movements and ferreting out our secrets!"

"And as dangerous as annoying," answered Vann, as he nervously wiped the perspiration from his face. "In all my anticipations of trouble, it never occurred to me that Comanche Jim or any other enemy would ride Diablo to the very door of his stable! And even now I can't imagine how the event was brought about! It is one of those accursed fatalities, unforeseen and unlikely, which are sure to come eventually to the best-laid plans, to bring them to ruin!"

He was silent until he reached the side entrance of his dining-room, into which he gave his intimates admittance with a latch-key, and then followed them and closed the door behind him.

The withdrawal of the trio, as revealed by the lanterns they carried, was duly remarked by Wugg, who stood at the door of the stable, which was slightly ajar, and peered cautiously out upon his surroundings.

"There they are," he muttered. "They give it up as a bad job, and drinking and feasting will be in order for the next hour."

Wugg knew what he was talking about. He had been admitted at times to the same sort of intimacy now extended to Weezy and Kriss.

Despite the success which had attended the villainous labors of John Vann, it is doubtful if a more miserable man than he could have been found in the Nation.

And certainly none more isolated and solitary. It's not too much to say that he hadn't a friend in the world.

His associates were simply hirelings who served him because he paid them liberally for their subservency to his wishes.

And this want of companionship was what threw him so much into the society of the ruffians who did his bidding.

It should be added, however, that he was as silent and unsociable at certain times as he was garrulous and unreserved at others.

His thoughts busy with reflections upon all these matters, the hostler again looked out into the night, his eyes and face lighting up with a gleam of satisfaction.

"Just such a night as I have been waiting for," he muttered. "Everything is at last as it should be. And now to be moving."

He looked at a clock hanging against the wall near him, under the rays of the lamp he was in the habit of burning all night.

The hour was within a few minutes of midnight.

Next he looked carefully to a revolver he carried in an inner pocket of his coat, and stood a loaded rifle into a corner, in the shadow of a projection, in such a way that the weapon was conveniently handy without being too much in view.

And finally he went into a stall and saddled and bridled the fastest horse of which the colonel was the owner.

It was this one the colonel himself would have called for, if he had been obliged to ride for his life—a shapely thoroughbred, long and slender of limb, with a life and vigor that could have been read alike in the activity of his step and in the bright restlessness of his eyes.

Leaving this horse in his stall, Wugg slipped up-stairs to the room where Mink was sleeping so soundly, and proceeded to gather into a parcel various personal effects which, while of no especial account, he did not care to leave to the investigations and remarks that would naturally follow his mysterious and abrupt departure.

This matter attended to, he muffled his feet by drawing a pair of stockings over his boots, and then took his way down-stairs and out of doors, proceeding to the stable of Diablo.

As short as was this journey, it was not made without many a halt devoted to watching and listening.

The men at the slaughter-house were as busy as ever, and groups of cattle could have frequently been seen to traverse the drive leading from the yard, but all else was strangely quiet.

There was a gleam of light at the colonel's dining-room, and another further back, where his old half-breed housekeeper and cook was habitually found, but no further displays of the kind were to be seen, save at the slaughter-house and stable.

One reason of this quietude has not yet been fully stated.

It was owing to the fact that many of the outlaws slept during the early part of the night so as to be ready to rise correspondingly early, that there was so little sound and movement to be noted by Wugg at that moment.

Reaching the entrance of Diablo's stable without noise, Wugg applied his eye, and then his ear, to the keyhole of the door.

What he saw and heard appeared to be satisfactory, for he drew a key from his vest-pocket and inserted it into the lock, and then gently drew the door open, stepping within with the utmost celerity, and closing the door behind him.

The steer was lying down.

As Wugg entered, it turned upon him a strange regard with a singularly glassy and staring eye, but seemed indifferent to his presence.

The dim light illuminating the scene, and which was kept burning habitually all night, sufficed to show its principal features.

A second gleam of light came from overhead, blending with that below.

The second gleam had its source in the little room of Jed, the half-breed who had charge of the steer, and who slept immediately over Diablo, in an airy loft, which was reached through a square hole in the floor, to which ascended a ladder, secured perpendicularly against one of the walls of the stable, as already mentioned.

Listening a moment, Wugg noted the heavy breathing which came down to his hearing through the aperture in question.

Jedediah was asleep.

From the manner of Wugg, it would have been seen at a glance that this was not his first secret visit to the steer's stable.

One of his earliest proceedings, after his arrival at the island, had been to procure a duplicate key of both of the doors by which Diablo came and went.

Subsequently, with a little care and patience, Wugg had been able to visit the stable repeatedly, in the absence of the steer and its keeper, and had carefully assured himself of all its facts and features, without drawing upon himself the suspicion of his companions, or even their attention.

Locking the door behind him, Wugg ascended the ladder with easy, swinging movements, and raised his head through the aperture in the floor of the loft, surveying the sleeper.

Then he resumed progress, passing through the aperture, and advancing on his hands and knees to the side of the unconscious half-breed.

It was a bold invasion, without doubt.

As much was suggested by a revolver which lay on a little shelf at Jed's head, in readiness for use at a moment's warning.

But Wugg merely smiled with an air of content as he secured the weapon, and then proceeded to bind the sleeper hand and foot with such quiet and gentle movements that he was helpless before he at length awakened.

And then Jed was gagged, becoming as silent as helpless.

The half-breed having been thus reduced to the desired state of helplessness, Wugg hastened to turn out the pockets of his victim with the air of making an especial search for something.

What he was looking for, in fact, was the ring and cord by which Jed was in the habit of leading the animal from the stable to the yard, or elsewhere, as occasion demanded.

Of course it was the last thing found, but it eventually made its appearance from an inner vest-pocket, and the other articles were duly restored to their places, but not without being duly examined.

Among them was a tin box, which had originally contained shoe-blackening, but was now two-thirds full of a substance which at once presented itself to Wugg as a mystery, both as regarded its nature and use.

His first impression was that he had before him a sort of salve, which was designed for application to the scratches and bruises the steer necessarily received in its wild flights in the darkness.

The odor of the compound seemed to confirm this view of the matter.

But on touching it with his tongue he quickly dismissed that theory.

The mysterious substance burned like fire!

"Some poi on! some drug!" said Wugg to himself. "Yet it would not be here if it were not in some way connected with the steer. I may as well take charge of it, and await events."

Securing the tin box in his pocket, he hastily descended the ladder and unlocked the door by which he had reached the steer's presence, stepping out a moment and bending a searching glance in every direction around him.

The result being satisfactory, he slipped back into Diablo's stable with an air which meant business.

The moment for action had come!

CHAPTER XXXV.

BETWEEN MAN AND BRUTE.

A THRILL traversed the frame of Wugg, as he again turned his gaze upon the gigantic steer, and his undertaking suddenly struck him as being of a more formidable character than he had previously considered it.

What a monster the animal seemed, when seen from such a near point of view, and in such comparatively narrow quarters!

Somehow, too, there was something singular and unusual about him.

He seemed very quiet, with a quietude almost suggestive of torpor.

Perhaps, however, this was to have been expected at such a late hour, and after such a wearying run as the creature had accomplished.

The more Wugg contemplated the steer, the sharper became his recognition of the difficulties of the task he had undertaken.

How he regretted that he had found no opportunities of making the animal acquainted with him!

What a pity, too, that he must proceed with his task in utter ignorance of the ways and means of handling the steer, with which long experience had made Vann and the half-breed familiar!

But Wugg was no coward.

Neither was he a man to lightly abandon a project to which he had given several months of careful study and preparation.

Especially when the reward of his success was to be the handsome sum of five thousand dollars.

If he realized more keenly than ever, therefore, the serious nature of his undertaking, he did not hesitate for a moment about carrying it out.

He merely called new courage and energy to his aid, and prepared himself for a serious and even desperate struggle.

Stepping nearer, he patted the steer on his uppermost hip and side, with a few words intended to be as soothing as gentle, and he was pleased to see that no opposition was offered to these insidious advances.

As his hand reached the withers of the animal, however, it tossed its head vigorously with a snuffle of annoyance, which caused the pulse of the hostler to quicken.

Nevertheless, he continued his attentions until the steer swung one of its long and sharp horns toward him with an energy which must be characterized as decidedly vicious and menacing.

The steer was no longer indifferent to the presence of the intruder.

In fact, it was getting visibly annoyed.

"That means 'shoo fly,' clearly enough," muttered Wugg. "How shall I manage him?"

That was indeed the question.

It was no wonder that the intruder gave it several moments of earnest consideration.

Naturally enough, it occurred to Wugg that the first necessity in the case was to get the animal upon its feet.

"Get up," he ordered, touching the steer's side with the toe of his boot.

The steer not obeying the injunction, Wugg repeated it more sternly, accompanying the order with a vicious kick.

The only response was a menacing toss of Diablo's head, which caused his wide-branching horns to gleam in the light like swords.

The hostler began to get annoyed in his turn.

"Get up, I say!" he commanded, with several rapid thrusts of a coarse needle with which he had provided himself. "Up with you!"

The steer suddenly sprang to his feet with such energy as to cause the whole floor, and even the building itself, to tremble.

Then it stepped about uneasily, swinging its massive head from side to side, but within well-defined limits, as if conscious of being secured by a stout rope to its manger.

Its eyes had lost their previous glassy repose, and had become vividly active.

"There! We shall get on, I reckon," ejaculated Wugg, with a glow of triumph. "You'll soon know which is the man and which is the brute."

Encouraged by the results attained, he jumped to the conclusion that boldness and vigor were what was required in handling the steer—that sort of vigor, in fact, which he had seen displayed by horse-tamers, and by men who enter the dens of lions and tigers.

Producing his cord and ring, therefore, he approached the head of the animal, with the intention of substituting them for the rope by which Diablo was secured.

At the same time, he laid hold of the horn on the side next to him with a gentle but firm grasp.

It was well that he was on his guard as he executed this movement, or he would have been spitted like a fowl put to roast, so sudden and savage was the toss which shook him off and flung him sprawling yards away, to the sill of the door by which he had entered.

Gathering himself up, and rubbing two or three bruises caused by this violence, Wugg stood motionless a moment, keenly alive to the fact that the steer was not to be so easily stolen as he had imagined.

He wondered if it were possible to make use of chloroform in such a way as to partially stupefy the steer and at the same time leave him capable of locomotion.

Then he remembered the strange drug he had taken from one of Jed's pockets.

Perhaps this was something which had been

found useful in modifying the animal's natural ferocity and wildness.

As this reflection traversed his mind, Wugg drew the tin box from his pocket.

He was astonished at what followed.

At sight of the tin box the steer became as keenly as strangely interested, losing, as if by magic, its combative and violent aspect.

It was as if a view of that box had suddenly tamed it.

It even seemed fascinated.

Turning its eye upon the box, it seemed to await further developments, becoming motionless, expectant, and eager.

"Ah, I see!" muttered Wugg. "They dose him with this to keep him quiet—to tame him!"

As little as he himself relished the pungent and burning taste of the compound, Wugg resolved to give Diablo some of it.

Taking off the lid of the box, he saw that the attention of the steer redoubled.

"Want a little, old fellow?" he said, extending the open box toward the animal.

The steer instantly stepped toward him, as far as its rope permitted, with a look of the most eager interest.

"All right," added Wugg. "You shall have it."

Detecting a significant movement of the steer's tongue at this moment, the hostler stepped toward him, with due precautions, and took about half of the strange drug from the box, placing it in the manger.

The steer instantly gave all his attention to the fascinating compound, beginning to lick it, much as it would lick salt, only more eagerly.

"So, you've found what you want, eh?" muttered Wugg, as he ran his hand down the steer's nose and snapped the ring into place. "We're all right now, old fellow! Just get that dose into you, and we'll bid adieu to Salt Island!"

While speaking, he unfastened the rope with which Diablo had been secured to the manger, and lighted a dark lantern he took from a nail near at hand, and which he had often remarked during his previous visits to the stable.

Waiting patiently, he watched the steer until it had finished the drug and raised its head, as if to ask for more, and then he took hold of the nigh horn with his right hand, at the same time pulling the cord with his left, and moved toward the door.

The steer followed promptly in the desired direction.

"Ah, it's all right, now," muttered the hostler jubilantly, as he slung the lantern upon his arm and opened the door of the stable. "I have him!"

And with this he stepped out into the darkness and storm, inviting the steer by another tug at the cord attached to the ring in the animal's nose to keep him company.

But Diablo tossed his head high into the air, and seemed disinclined to follow his abductor.

"Come on," enjoined Wugg, flourishing under the animal's nose the tin box containing the balance of the mysterious compound. "Be good, and you shall have more of this nice stuff! Come on," and he gave another pull at the cord. "Lively, old fellow!"

The fascination of the drug proved too much for Diablo, and he stepped briskly over the sill, thus giving his abductor a chance to close the door behind him.

"So far, good!" thought Wugg, as he assured himself by a keen glance around that his proceedings had not been discovered. "The first great step is taken!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"MANY A SLIP," ETC.

It seemed indeed at this moment as if Wugg was destined to make a success of his undertaking.

The steer was completely under the spell of the mysterious drug.

It had no eyes for anything else.

It did not even seem to notice the war of the elements, which had now fully set in, as threatened since the afternoon.

It kept nosing for the tin box and its contents, with an activity corresponding to its greed.

Realizing the advantage he had secured, Wugg promptly took his way down the drive leading to the river and the ford.

Two or three times the steer halted, tossing his head inquiringly into the air, but as often as he did so the hostler held the tin box to his nostrils a moment—barely long enough for Diablo to get the aroma from it—and then the animal made another prompt advance in the desired direction.

In this way man and steer were soon at the ford.

Here the watchfulness of Wugg increased.

He was looking for the sentry he knew to be on duty in that quarter.

Not much to his surprise, however, this sentry was otherwise engaged at this moment than in looking for either arrivals or departures.

The fellow was not even visible.

He had taken refuge in an improvised "box"

a few rods from the point where Wugg proposed to cross the west arm of the river, and had no intention of exposing himself to such a tempest as had set in without adequate reasons.

The noise caused by the steer naturally drew his attention in that direction, but the darkness was quite sufficient to prevent him from recognizing the animal as Diablo, or from seeing that the steer covered a man who was walking beside it.

"And of what account was a steer?"

In fact, the first impression of the sentry was that the animal was in quest of a drink from the river.

And when he recognized his error: when, in fact, he saw that the steer was wading the stream, it was too late to act upon his information.

He had received no orders to shoot down a steer because it was crossing the ford, or for any other reason, and as to plunging into the water himself to recover the fugitive, he would have considered his mind unsound to even suggest such a piece of folly.

As he looked and watched, therefore, man and steer reached the west bank of the Cimarron, the latter vanishing from his gaze.

And with what joy Wugg thus found himself clear of the island will be understood without telling.

But at this instant the steer halted again.

Not merely halted, but shook its head with a discontented snuffle.

It was evidently getting annoyed at the frequent tantalizations to which it had been subjected respecting the alluring compound remaining in the tin box.

Its aspect was even threatening.

"There! take a little," said Wugg, holding the box to the animal's nose.

He waited until Diablo had complied, and then resumed his former tactics, moving forward rapidly, and holding the tin box just beyond the animal's reach, at the same time that it was near enough for him to get a strong scent from it.

And thus man and steer went on their way, the steer taking such strides at times, in his vain attempts to overtake the fascinating drug, that the hostler had to run to keep it beyond his reach.

Many a time had the abductor surveyed the route he intended to use, if he ever got clear of Salt Island with his prize, and hence he knew it so well that it was not at all difficult for him to follow it in the darkness, even with the drawback of the accompanying tempest.

Ere long he reached and crossed the mouth of Salt Creek, still following the general course of the river.

Looking behind him, he saw the light gleaming from the open door of the slaughter-house, but nothing to suggest that his own absence or that of Diablo had been discovered.

He was entitled to conclude, therefore, that the half-breed was still a prisoner where he had been left, and that Vann was still entertaining his assistants at his dwelling.

Pleased with the good luck which had thus far attended him, he was pressing forward with renewed ardor, when Diablo came to an abrupt halt again.

And this time with a mien that showed even more anger than disgust.

"Take another taste," said Wugg.

As he extended his hand, the tin box came in such violent contact with the nose of the steer, that the balance of the tempting drug was thrown out on the ground.

Of course the steer readily found it, by the organ of smell, and began licking it with even greater eagerness than it had previously shown.

The first impulse of Wugg was to stoop and feel under the very head and horns of the steer for the drug, with a view to its recovery, but, fortunately for him, he rejected the temptation.

Then he hesitated a moment about turning the slide of his lantern.

Seeing, however, that there was a thick fringe of bushes, and even a low bluff, between him and the island, he decided to run the risk of being seen from a distance for the sake of seeing what was going on beside him.

He accordingly turned the slide of his dark-lantern, thus allowing a flood of light to pour upon the steer's head and upon the ground in front of him.

One glance—and he recoiled as far as he could without letting go of the cord attached to the ring in the animal's nose.

The nigh forefoot of the steer was advanced, in the position naturally taken by cattle when they are licking anything upon the ground.

Its eyes were like balls of fire.

Its head was waving from side to side, with a movement corresponding to the movements of its tongue, as it licked the seductive poison.

As Wugg made a slight change in his position, but without any intention of interfering with the animal, it suddenly rushed at him, with lowered head and leveled horns, and with such a wild, furious, vicious celerity that the hostler had all he could do to avoid its onslaught and get out of the way by taking refuge behind a tree that happened to be close beside him.

Then back it went to its alluring drug!

The hostler began to comprehend the situation.

He had made a terrible mistake!

He had given the steer ten times as much of the drug as it ought to have eaten, and it was losing its head with the overdose, precisely as a man loses his head when he takes too much of almost any of our popular poisons.

The whole frame of the gigantic steer was tremulous with fury.

Its eyes seemed bursting from their sockets.

It began pawing the ground, first with one foot, and then with the other, even while it continued to lick the drug greedily.

A low bellow escaped it, from time to time, as if it were maddened with pain, or delirious.

And then, just as Wugg noticed that the animal had eaten all the drug, and even gnawed the grass where it lay, the steer tossed its head high into the air, fixing him with its wild eyes, and made another furious lunge at him.

Of course he ran around the tree, the steer in pursuit, and the rope winding as they went.

Remarking, after two or three turns, that the cord had crossed itself, or lapped in such a way as to bind, Wugg resolved to wind the animal to the tree and then make his escape.

There was no longer any question of securing the five thousand dollars offered for the steer.

The only question which now absorbed him was that of saving his own life.

Round and round they went, until the steer's nose came in contact with the trunk of the tree, and then Wugg, who had long since let go of the winding cord, of course, made a break for dear life.

A snort—a jerk of the head—and the steer was after him!

It had torn the ring from its nose!

As Wugg had naturally expected the steer to bolt for the island in case it got clear, he had taken the opposite direction, but he quickly saw his error.

The steer's first object seemed to be to make an end of him!

Fortunately there was a second tree within attainable distance, and Wugg darted behind it, and the head and horns of the steer came dashing into that obstacle with such fury as to cause the shore to ring with the concussion.

Bellowing with rage and pain, the steer retreated a yard or two, pawing the ground again and lashing its flanks with its tail, and then, as if possessed by a fury, it broke away at a gallop to the southward, or along the river-bank, in the direction of the Abilene Cattle Trail.

How like a demon it went!

The ground seemed to tremble beneath it.

Wugg held his breath, expecting to see the furious animal dash headlong into some tree, but it tore through a fringe of bushes with a sound like that of a knife cutting paper, and in another minute was fifty rods away, still going like the wind.

"Great Scott! wait till he meets somebody!" muttered Wugg, drawing his first long breath for several minutes.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AT KINGFISHER CREEK STATION.

THE ride of Comanche Jim to Kingfisher Creek Stage Station, with a led horse, was quickly and safely accomplished, despite the wild storm of wind and rain in which he was enveloped.

This result was chiefly owing, it must be confessed, to the fact that Jim had become so thoroughly familiar with the route, for his lantern was blown out before he left the camp of the cowboys a hundred rods behind him, and he realized that it would be a double folly to attempt to light it again or to keep it lighted in such a storm as was raging.

At the stage station in question was a rude shed, open on two sides, but the other end was directly in the wind, and it consequently afforded a fair degree of protection.

Here Jim alighted, taking the trouble to tie his horses, as he knew that a sudden burst of wind or a dash of rain, to say nothing of a whirling branch, might give them a start into the adjacent woods or prairies, and thus rob him of their services until morning.

Then he hastened to knock at the door of the office reception-room and dwelling—a box-like room about twelve feet square.

His knock was loud and brisk, for the simple reason that he was rendered nervous by finding the premises enshrouded in total darkness.

At first there was no reply, and for a good if not sufficient reason.

Old Gillett, the worthy retired scout who had for years represented the stage line of the Abilene Cattle Trail at Kingfisher Creek Station, had too rarely had a full night's sleep, not to take advantage of such an occasion as the present.

"There'll be nobody here to-night," Gillett had said to himself at nightfall, and I may as well make myself comfortable!"

What he meant by making himself comfort-

able, can be understood without many volumes of commentaries.

He would feast, and he would drink, and he'd get to bed early, after first putting out all lights, so as to suggest to any possible chance-comer that the station was closed for the night, and that he begged to be excused until morning.

How smooth and mellow the world looked to Bob Gillett, as he turned in to realize this felicity, need not be stated.

And how he slept! The "sleep of the just" is the only known article that can even suggest how Bob made up for lost time on that occasion.

To begin with, the discord of the elements was just what he wanted to lull him to slumber.

All the uproar around him was to Bob exactly what the sweet voice of a mother is to her child.

And of course his sleep was as sound as all these considerations, with about "three fingers" of whisky several times repeated could make it.

He slept as if he had started in on a wager to oust the memory of Rip Van Winkle from among the children of men.

And just then, as fairy faces were bending over him, and inviting him to take another drink, there came that brutal and ill-timed summons.

But business had become business to Gillett, and habitude had developed its own electricity.

In "one time" and in "one motion," therefore, Bob was out of his snug berth, and moving across the floor of his den.

"Who's there?" he called.

Jim hastened to answer.

"All right. Wait a moment."

Several strong bolts were shot back, for Gillett frequently handled large sums of money, he being the nearest agent to several of the great cattle companies who occupy the Oklahoma prairies.

And then the door was opened.

"Come in out of the wet," invited Gillett.

"I'll strike a light."

His lamp was burning by the time Jim had shaken the wet from his hat and cloak and entered, closing the door behind him.

"You'll excuse me for stirring you up, Bob," said the new-comer.

"Oh, business before pleasure," returned Gillett, with a sigh at the recollection of the fairy and the drink which had vanished. "But what's up?"

"We're in an awful shake-up," explained Jim.

"It's essential that I telegraph instantly to every station between here and Caldwell. Is the line in working order?"

"Well, the circuit's on everywhere, if that's what you mean," answered Gillett. "But nobody's 'on call' at this hour—of course not. Everybody's abed and asleep, as none of us operators are more'n human."

"Well, we must call 'em up," said Comanche Jim, hurriedly. "A hundred dollars, if necessary, for a few lines of business; but no delays, if you will be so kind. Stir 'em up!"

Gillett took one good look at the excited face of his visitor, and then hurried to his instrument, beginning to pound upon the key.

"Call 'em all," added Jim. "Give 'em thunder and lightning! Make 'em think that chain-lightning, hot and numerous, is at this end of the line, old fellow! Call Baker, Buffalo, Hopkins, and all the rest! Kick, pound and dance!"

Bob Gillett did the best he could to respond to these injunctions, beating a tattoo that in ordinary hours and times would have caused the operators along the line to think that some new "odic," or other force, had been miraculously developed.

And then Bob awaited a response.

But waited in vain!

"Not a sound!" he cried, in a tone of disgust. "It's like spading in a cemetery—nothing more or less."

Again he went at it, sending out a veritable uproar, that would have made any receiver apprehensive that all the mixed tribes and nations of the Territory had got into a bloody scrimmage, and were sending the essence of this scrimmage over the wire.

But all in vain again.

There came no response.

"Great juniper! How they sleep!" exclaimed Bob, wiping his forehead. "A quart of lodlum to each operator couldn't have made 'em dummer!"

He looked inquiringly at Jim, who was pale with suppressed excitement.

"Give 'em another!" ordered the cowboy.

For the third time Bob vivified the line with his calls, but in vain.

"Pity I can't put a little dynamite on the wire," muttered Jim, thinking of the supply of that article he had in his valise. "How do you account for this silence?"

"Why, it accounts for itself—almost," answered Gillett. "I don't remember that we ever had a call to do business at midnight. The agents're all asleep, and they're so used to this sort of music that it has no more effect upon their slumbers than water on a duck. But what is the trouble?"

"Well, there is a young lady coming down the trail in a private conveyance—"

"But not in this storm, Jim!"

"Oh, yes. The storm'll make no difference. The young lady is engaged to Sam Hooper. She has been informed by telegraph that Sam has been nearly killed and is barely alive—"

"But it isn't true!"

"No, it's a gum game put up on Sam and the girl by Colonel Vann, who is seeking to be revenged on the pair because the girl once rejected him!"

He added the details of the situation in a few rapid sentences, and then resumed:

"You can see at a glance, therefore, what I wanted to do. I want to tell the girl that Sam is all right, and that she is not to go to Salt Island. In a word, I wish to put her on the right track, so that she'll come to us, or wait for us to meet her somewhere, or otherwise take measures to give Colonel Vann the slip in his infernal schemes!"

"I see—I see!" commented Bob. "Poor girl! What a pity it is that we don't get any answer! But let me give you a hint, Jim. I'll remain awake and keep this end of the line open, while you take to the trail, and ride for your life!"

"That is just what I was about to propose," said Jim, as he handed out a crisp ten-dollar bill.

"Here, take this. I know it's of no use to offer you money, Bob, for all you can do to help me in this matter, for you carry a heart under your shirt, and are a real man. No, the 'ten' is to pay for any message you may send in answer to mine in the course of the next few hours, or for any messenger to camp, or for any other use that may be necessary."

"All right," said Bob, as he pocketed the note. "I shall sit at the instrument until this tangle is righted, and the young lady is safe. You have good horses?"

"Yes, a pair of them, so as to have a relay. Do you break your circuit when you go to bed?"

"No, nor at any other time," replied Gillett. "It's against orders. The circuits're all kept open, at all times, and at all the stations."

"Then you'd better watch all the business of the line during the next few hours, and take off all messages that may be sent anywhere to me, by Miss Allington—that's the young lady's name—or by Colonel Vann, whether in his own name or in Sam's!"

"All right. He used Sam's name, did he?"

"Exactly, and that's how he has done so much mischief."

"Depend upon me, Jim. But let me see you off," and Bob raised his lantern and opened the door. "Fortunately you know the trail too well to go astray even in this darkness," he added, as he lighted his visitor toward the shed. "Take good care of yourself, and keep me posted. There's a man near here I can send on any errand you may direct, and you still have a horse of your own here, you must remember."

He waved his hand toward a little stable back of the station, referring of course to the horse which had been left there for Sam's use.

"Many thanks, Bob," said the cowboy, with a hearty grasp of the hand, and away he went in his usual lively fashion.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

FEARS AND THEIR REALIZATION!

THE Abilene Cattle Trail from Kingfisher Creek to Baker Stage Station was even better known to Comanche Jim than the route he had just traversed.

He would have been able to follow it "with his eyes shut!"

He had often been called upon to traverse this particular stretch of the trail at night since he had been driving cattle between Texas and Kansas, and he had taken special notice of its characteristics.

Always, even on the darkest night, there is some outline of wood or hill, some configuration of road or river, which experienced travelers find almost as serviceable as if all the features of the landscape were present to his vision.

So it proved now.

Jim's horses were at first inclined to fly the track, the wind and rain being in their faces, but once taught to the contrary, in the cowboy's vigorous style, they took their work resolutely and faithfully, flew over the trail like phantoms.

The last few miles of the course of the Kingfisher Creek, to the point where it empties into the Cimarron, being almost in a northerly direction, and the trail following this same course, it was not at all difficult for Jim to keep alive to his whereabouts.

He continued his ride without delay or break, therefore, and without in the least heeding the wild state of the weather.

His thoughts, notwithstanding the surroundings were rather within than without.

The truth is, he began to have some strange and terrible misgivings.

If Edna Allington were really on the trail, how did it happen that the various stations along the trail were so dead to her presence?

She certainly must have passed some of the

many stations within an hour or two; must have aroused marked attention, if only by traveling at such an unseasonable hour, and in such a wild storm, must have had food or other supplies; must have changed horses, or even stopped to rest, or to make inquiries, or in some other way have presented herself to public notice.

And such being the case, how did it happen that none of the persons encountering her had given heed enough to her case to be curious about it, to discuss it with others, and so remain afoot or at least awake, until Bob Gillett's call could reach them?

For instance, if only an hour had passed since she left Caldwell, or Hopkins, or Huckleberry Creek, how did it happen that the place thus visited and passed could not be aroused by the prolonged and excited calls of the agent at Kingfisher Creek.

Certainly, here was a mystery—a problem—a disquieting suggestion!

If she were *not* on the trail, so much the better, since there was so much the less danger of her falling into the hands of Vann.

But if she were really on the trail, making her way southward, and yet no trace of her could be obtained, what did that fact signify, or even suggest?

Why, in this latter case, it could be nothing less than that Miss Allington had for a driver some villain who was playing into Vann's hands, some miscreant who was possibly Vann's ally, and who was keeping her away from the knowledge of the stage agents!

As Jim reached this conclusion, he experienced a thrill of terror.

He began to lean to the theory that Miss Allington had fallen into the hands of some rascal in close relations with Vann.

How easy for the colonel to have managed his plot in such a way as to put one of his confederates upon the box at Caldwell in the capacity of driver!

Worried almost to desperation by these reflections, Comanche Jim flew over the trail as rapidly as if pursued by a band of assassins.

By the time he had fully confirmed himself in the disagreeable conclusions we have indicated, he had reached the point where the trail crosses the Cimarron.

Here, after passing the stream, he transferred himself to the horse he had hitherto led, continuing his course with increased rapidity.

The distance between Kingfisher Creek Station and Baker's being only thirteen miles, he reached the latter point in less than an hour after taking leave of Gillett.

The station showed a light as Jim rode up to it and secured his horses under the shed, but displayed no other sign of life.

Taking his way to the door, he knocked vigorously, but without results.

At his second tattoo, however, accompanied by a violent rattling of the door, there arose sounds of a stir within, and a voice called:

"What do you want?"

"To come in, naturally."

"Who are you?"

Jim curbed his impatience, and gave the desired information.

The stir within took sudden increase, the door was opened, and a wondering voice bade the traveler enter, which Jim did promptly, closing the door behind him.

The agent at Baker's was a retired stage-driver named Conklin.

He was not quite as lively as he had been in the days when to cross Indian Territory was a perilous undertaking, but he was nevertheless highly appreciated in his present post, and was capable, kindly and obliging.

"You must have lively business, Jim, to be on the road at such an hour and in such a storm," he said, when greetings had been exchanged.

"Alone?"

Jim nodded, shaking himself like a Newfoundland just out of the water.

"You must excuse me for not hearing you sooner, if you've been pounding long," pursued the agent. "The fact is," and he stretched himself, with a yawn and a glance at his clock, "I was in my first sleep. Had barely got off. I sat up till midnight to wait for a party who ought to have been here hours ago—"

"What kind of a party?" interrupted Jim.

"A young lady who is coming down the trail in this storm, it seems. Don't know who she is, but got a line by wire from Hopkins to ask if I knew anything about her, for the reason that the operator at that point thought there was some mystery or possibly rascality involved in the matter."

"How rascality?" queried Jim, with his heart in his throat.

"Why, the young woman is traveling in a private carriage with her folks, and took pains to go around the station at Hopkins, taking to the open, as if anxious not to be seen by even the agent, but inasmuch as he *did* see 'em, and thought the whole maneuver suspicious, why, he took the trouble to ask me to keep my eye peeled and send him such particulars as I could pick up when the party struck here!"

"When should she have been here?" asked Jim, pale with suppressed excitement.

"At nine o'clock or sooner!"

"Four hours ago!" muttered Jim, wiping his forehead nervously. "And now lost somewhere in this storm! Where can she be, Conklin?"

"Goodness knows, Jim! Do *you* know anything about her?—who she is, and where she's going?"

The cowboy assented dumbly.

"Must have had an ignoramus for a driver," muttered Conklin, his professional instincts at once coming to the front. "Or else some disgrace to the name who has driven her out of the way on purpose. But where was she bound, Jim?"

"To Salt Island."

"Fact? Then one or two things. Either she has stopped somewhere by the way for the night, or she has left the trail at the great bend, midway between Buffalo Spring and Huckleberry Station, and is going by way of Turkey Creek. I came to the former conclusion long ago, and wired the agent at Hopkins accordingly and went to bed!"

"And he evidently did likewise," said Jim, "as I couldn't raise a squeak on the whole line an hour ago from Kingfisher. But how to learn which of the two courses Miss Allington has taken?"

"I know of only one way," responded the ex-driver promptly, "and that is to throw yourself on the Turkey Creek route as soon as you can. You know it, I s'pose?"

"Perfectly. We've fed over it two or three times. But what's your idea?"

"Why, to get to the Turkey Creek Bridge as soon as you can. If the girl has passed, the tracks of the carriage will show the fact, after such a rain as this. And if she hasn't passed—why, you can just settle into the breeching at that point, and make things lively for the knave or fool of a driver when he puts in an appearance!"

At this instant came such a vehement crash on the telegraphic instrument near which Conklin was standing that he started.

"That's from Gillett," said Jim. "Tell him I'm here, and ask what he wants."

Conklin hastened to comply, and within two minutes had taken off the wire for Jim the following message:

"Have stirred up Huckleberry at last. Mr. Hooper and wife have arrived there on foot, after a fight with driver, who has got away with girl on Turkey Creek Trail. Shall be open all night for any orders. GILLETT."

Comanche Jim uttered a shout of joy, wrath, and resolve, all in one.

"On the Turkey Trail!" he ejaculated.

"If you don't head him off, you can certainly overtake him before he can get to Salt Island!" cried Conklin.

"Quick, then," resumed Jim. "Tell the Hoopers to stay where they are till they hear from me, and add that I am on the wake of that driver. Tell Gillett to notify camp instantly by messenger of all he knows and what I'm doing, and to say that Sam and all the rest are to come *here*, to Baker's. Be lively, Conklin. Good-by for the present."

And in a few moments more Jim was flying on his new course as if he were an incarnation of the tempest!

CHAPTER XXXIX.

JIM AND MISS ALLINGTON.

How rapidly Comanche Jim rode to the Turkey Creek Bridge, after leaving Baker's Stage Station, need not be related.

Yet he had begun to be hopeful.

It was something that he had got track of Miss Allington and the friends by whom she was accompanied.

With the knowledge that Mr. and Mrs. Hooper were at Huckleberry Station, under cover of the telegraph, and that the maiden was somewhere on the Turkey Creek Trail, the situation was immensely modified in the right direction.

Arriving near the bridge, Jim hastily dismounted, inclining his ear a moment toward the two cardinal points, namely, the two ends of the trail which so especially concerned him.

But he heard only the sighing of the wind and the patter of the rain.

At this bridge, as is natural, there is a considerable fringe of trees on each side of the creek, and also a favorable configuration of the ground, so that the spot was the most sheltered of any Jim had found since leaving the camp.

It was easy to see, too, that the storm had now culminated.

With these favoring circumstances, it was not difficult for Jim to light his lantern and make use of it.

His attention was first given to the trail near the bridge, and just ahead of the tracks caused by his own horses.

Immediately to his joy, no fresh trace of a hoof or a wheel was visible!

The abductor had not passed!

"In time, it seems!" muttered the cowboy, with a thrill of triumph. "That rascally driver has not put in an appearance!"

Securing his horses to a convenient tree near

the trail, he looked for a fallen trunk or limb with which to barricade the bridge, and was not long in finding and placing everything he needed.

He had scarcely finished this task, when the sounds of an approaching carriage fell upon his hearing.

It came from the right direction, or from the northward.

The mere fact that it was in motion at such an hour, and in such a direction, was enough to enlighten Jim in regard to its identity.

If he had the least doubt in the matter, however, it would have been dissipated by the cry that came from the carriage.

"Help! help!"

Jim fancied he could recognize the voice as that of Miss Allington.

It was certainly the voice of a woman, girlish and musical, notwithstanding the high key in which it was pitched.

What a picture of Nemesis he looked, as he took up his position on the causeway near the bridge and waited!

Waited! With his lantern concealed, until the heads of the horses were flung high into the air, in terror of his presence, and then he took them by the bits, at the same time producing his lantern.

"Get down, my man, and come here," he commanded, as he brought the horses to a standstill. "And take notice that I've got the drop upon you!"

Lantern in one hand, and revolver in the other, with his eyes flaming with stern wrath and swift vengeance, Jim was such a picture at that moment that very few men could have refused to obey orders.

"What—what's the trouble?" faltered the driver, as he sprang down and advanced toward the cowboy.

"As you see, the trail is barricaded," and Jim flashed his light over the limbs and timbers he had placed athwart the bridge. "You will drive this carriage no further to-night!"

"Oh, thank God!" came in tones of the wildest joy and relief from the interior of the vehicle.

"Who—who are you?" stammered the driver, as he came to a halt under the blaze of Jim's eyes and lantern, and the muzzle of Jim's revolver.

"I'm known as Comanche Jim," answered the cowboy, "and I am just now your commander-in-chief. As one good turn deserves another, you will kindly tell me who *you* are and just what you're doing!"

The driver was an ignoble-looking ruffian, as would naturally be the case with a man found in such a position, and like all similar ruffians was a coward and a weakling, when it came to such a situation as had now been thrust upon him.

It did not take him a second to become as limp as a rag.

"I'm one of Colonel Vann's men, as you are doubtless aware," he replied. "My name is Rigler. For several weeks past, I have been at Caldwell, as Vann's agent, with especial orders to watch at all trains and stages for Sam Hooper, who was expected to take a trip into the Nation, to look after his cattle interests in that quarter."

"And so it comes about—to cut a long story short—that you have foisted yourself on Miss Allington and her friends, to take them over the trail?" queried Jim hurriedly.

"Yes, sir. They supposed me to be one of the drivers of the stages over the Abilene Cattle Trail. In fact, I represented myself as such!"

"That'll do, Rigler—since the young lady is waiting. Lie down on your face!"

Rigler did not hesitate, as muddy as was the causeway.

In a minute he was bound hand and foot, disarmed, and thrown upon the top of the carriage, as if he had been a piece of useless lumber.

And then Jim advanced to one of the windows of the carriage, holding his lantern in such a way as to light himself and whatever there might be before him.

"You've heard, Miss Allington?" he said, as he removed his hat and saluted the occupant of the carriage with a bow worthy of a Chesterfield.

"Yes, and *seen*," and a white shapely hand stole out to Jim's, and a starey pair of eyes shone into his face. "What joy, what relief to see you! But Sam!"

"Of course he's all right," assured Jim. "All the communications you have received since Sam entered the Nation have been lies and forgeries sent you by Colonel Vann!"

"And Sam has *not* had any fight with his enemy," and has *not* been 'very seriously wounded,' as was affirmed in that terrible telegram?"

"No more than he has had a fight with the man in the moon, Miss Allington."

"Then why is he not here with you?"

"That I will explain as we drive along to Baker's," replied Jim, as he set about cutting the rope which had been wound around the carriage several times as an anaconda winds itself around its victim. "I am already aware that Mr. and Mrs. Hooper are safe at Huckleberry

Station, and this will be good news for you. There!" and Jim drew off the fragments of rope his knife had so promptly produced. "The door can be opened now. Be patient a moment, and we'll resume progress."

It took Jim less than a minute to clear the bridge and hitch his horses to the rear of the carriage, and then he sprung to the box and seized the reins, and the carriage started for Baker's.

"When did you first get suspicious of this man, Miss Allington?" asked Jim.

"Soon after leaving Caldwell," was the answer. "We noticed at first that he seemed anxious to avoid being seen. Then Mr. Hooper remarked that the driver was taking us *around* the stations so as not to be seen by the agents, instead of following the trail *past* them. Various things came to confirm our suspicions, and soon after leaving Huckleberry Station, Mr. Hooper noticed that the villain had left the trail altogether, which was contrary to what we expected. After some inquiry and protestation from Mr. Hooper, the villainous driver suddenly gave Mr. Hooper a blow that left him senseless, pitched Mrs. Hooper out beside her husband, scaring her so that she fainted, and then had a battle with me, the outcome of which I am sorry to confess, was that he forced me back into the carriage, and secured the doors against me just as you found them."

"A bad and trying situation for you, of course," commented Jim sympathetically. "But it's all over now, and we have reason to rejoice that it is no worse."

"And now for *your* explanations, Jim," said the young lady earnestly. "I am dying to hear them."

Jim proceeded to explain and relate all that had happened, as known to the reader, so far as Jim knew it.

CHAPTER XL.

CARRYING THEIR POINT.

NEAR the camp of the cowboys, at the moment when Jim entered upon the wild rides we have chronicled, could have been seen three silent and motionless horsemen with their gaze fixed upon the gleam of light which showed the whereabouts of the tent.

They were the Cherokee allies who had been so useful to Vann, and the man who had placed himself in waiting near the camp with horses for the return journey to the island.

The two were within a few rods of the spot where they had encountered Comanche Jim, and where their insensible prisoner, the young cattle-dealer had been taken from them.

Despite the activity they had shown in placing themselves beyond the reach of Jim's revolver, they had not entertained for a moment the thought of returning empty-handed to their employer.

They had merely yielded temporarily to the pressure put upon them, precisely as a tree yields to a tempest only to spring erect when the tempest is past.

"Evidently a departure," muttered Pepper, without removing his eyes from the tent.

"Yes. Comanche Jim has gone on some new trail," returned Salt. "And once he's out of the way, what have we to fear?"

"Exactly," said Pepper, as he withdrew from his lips the bottle he had secured at the tent a few hours before, as related. "With Jim at a distance, what is there to prevent us from resuming business?"

Both Salt and Guss took long drinks in silence, but with evident assent to the suggestions of their leader.

"Take another drop, both of you," enjoined Pepper, shaking the bottle, as it was handed back to him, "and I'll finish it. We've a long ride before us, and have no call to carry an empty bottle."

The whisky was accordingly finished.

"And now to business," resumed Pepper, as he threw away the empty bottle. "We were speaking, Salt, of the necessity of reaching cash results in all these proceedings."

"Yes, that's the point to bear in mind," returned Salt. "To go back to Vann in *this* shape is out of the question."

"We can do no less, therefore," proceeded Pepper, "than get hold of young Hooper again. No doubt he is still unconscious. The dose I gave him was intended to last."

"Yes, there he is, in that tent, under our very eyes," muttered Salt, "and the essential now is to hit upon some way of getting hold of him. How shall we get at it? Of course you see your way, Pepper?"

"Of course," answered Pepper. "Give me ten minutes to place my horse in readiness and get to the tent, and you and Guss may then raise an alarm in any way you please. It will be no great risk for you to fire a shot or two pretty close to the cattle, and to yell in such a way as to suggest an attack from that quarter."

"And then?" queried Salt.

"Why, that's all there is of it. You can get away as soon as you like to the foot of that bluff where we were at sundown. Of course there will be a rush of cowboys toward the sup-

posed scene of trouble. Bartle can do no less than hurry in the same direction, and that old coon will be left alone in the tent with his insensible employer. If necessary, it will be easy to reduce Filkins to silence and helplessness, but he won't give us that trouble. He's sure to go to the entrance of the tent, or step out in front of it, to see and hear what's going on, and that will give me just the opportunity I want. To raise young Hooper and get away with him will be the work of a moment!"

"Sure enough," commented Salt. "Go ahead, Pepper, as soon as you please. Guss and I'll not be found wanting."

We need not pause upon the execution of the work thus planned.

It was even easier than expected.

The curiosity of old Filkins was such that he took several steps outside of the tent, instead of remaining on the watch within, as Bartle told him to do at the moment of hurrying away to the scene of noise and confusion just outside the grove, and of course this was all Pepper wanted.

So leisurely indeed did the crafty red-skin proceed, at the moment of invading the tent, which he did through a long slit he had cut in one side of it, that he had time to secure another bottle of whisky and his lantern before raising the insensible figure of young Hooper to his shoulder and hastening away with it, disappearing on the instant in the storm and darkness.

The flight to the rendezvous was made with similar promptitude, and it's safe to say that the three abductors were at the bluff named, with their prisoner, long before a suspicion of the ruse which had been played dawned upon Bartle, and he had hastened back to find his employer missing.

"You see how little the feat has worried me," remarked Pepper, as he held up his lantern and bottle to the view of his confederates. "And now let's be off for the island!"

The trio were promptly in motion, but had not gone far when Pepper became conscious that the prisoner was recovering his senses.

"We must halt long enough to tie his hands behind him," he said, "and perhaps we may as well place him in the saddle, with a cord from one foot to the other under the animal, so as to utterly prevent him from taking sudden leave of us."

These measures were soon taken.

"Pity we're a horse short," then muttered Salt.

"Yes. But we're a man ahead, and that's the essential," returned Pepper. "Besides, it will not hurt any of the horses to take turns in carrying two of us."

"No; nor hurt any of us to go afoot a portion of the distance," suggested Salt. "Ah, the prisoner is awake!"

Young Hooper had indeed opened his eyes, and was looking around wondering from one to another.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked, after realizing his situation.

"To Colonel Vann's," replied Pepper. "Unless you prefer to give us ten thousand dollars for your liberty."

"Is that your game? I never'll give you a cent."

"Then we know who will. Come on, boys."

The party resumed progress.

CHAPTER XLI.

BOOKED FOR TROUBLE.

COLONEL VANN was still busy in his dining-room with Weezy and the stockmaster, when bells suddenly tinkled over his head in the hall adjoining, in his sitting-room, and even in his bed-chamber.

With electrical effect, too!

The butcher of Salt Island sprung to his feet with spasmodic celerity.

His face flushed vividly.

"What is it?" queried Weezy, as he and Kriss gained their feet. "Some secret signal?"

"A hint from Jed that I'm wanted," explained Vann. "Will you go with me?"

He led the way rapidly from the room, and his hirelings followed him.

All seemed surprised at the development the storm had taken while they were chatting and drinking so cosily, but the colonel did not make any allusion to it, and even Weezy did not venture to break in upon his visible mental disturbance.

In a few moments he had crossed his lawn and walks to the stable of Diablo, the door of which he found unlocked—as Wugg had left it—greatly to his astonishment.

As he opened it and stepped into the stall, a yell of consternation escaped him.

"The steer's gone!" he gasped, his flush giving place to a ghastly pallor.

His aids followed him in horrified silence, staring around with him.

"Sure enough," at length gasped Weezy.

"But where's the half-breed?" demanded the stockmaster. "Has he gone, too?"

"No, or there would have been no one here to ring the bell. Jed's in his room!"

Raising his voice, he called the half-breed sharply two or three times in rapid succession, with a brief pause between each call.

A strange, incoherent, and mumbling sound was the only answer.

"The fellow's in a fit," exclaimed Weezy. "Let me see, sir!"

Without waiting a response, he went up the perpendicular ladder in the manner and with the rapidity of a sailor climbing his shrouds.

As he passed through the hole in the floor of the loft, a startled cry escaped him.

"Speak out," enjoined the colonel. "Is the fellow dead?"

"No, not dead—but a prisoner! He's gagged, and bound hand and foot!"

Drawing a pocket-knife, Weezy set free the half-breed, who showed his wild countenance the next moment at the aperture.

"It's that Wugg, sir," he gasped.

"Wugg! Quick, Weezy!"

The colonel made a dash for the stable, but a minute in that quarter was enough to pour considerable light upon the situation.

To begin with, he found his best horse saddled and bridled, and this was a hint that the absence of Wugg was wholly intentional.

Next he found Mink in such a sleep that it was impossible to arouse him, and this was another hint of the careful preparation the absent hostler had given his project.

And finally Vann thought of his poisoned dogs, and came to the conclusion that he himself had been almost careless enough to deserve his misfortunes.

But how he raved and cursed!

None of his hirelings had ever before seen him in such a furious passion.

"It is indeed Wugg!" he cried, as he hurried back to Jed for particulars. "Ten to one that man came here as a spy for Sam Hooper! It was Wugg who hid Comanche Jim, and they've gone away with Diablo together!"

"But why not pursue them?" suggested the stockmaster.

"Pursue them! In what direction? In such a storm as this, of what use would it be to look for them? Once clear of the island, they are as safe as if they were a thousand miles distant. Nevertheless, if you and Kriss choose to go and see what you can do in this line, you've only to saddle another horse and vanish!"

"I think the footprints of the steer can be followed after this rain, colonel," declared Weezy. "At least I'd like to try it."

"Go, then!"

Weezy and Kriss hurriedly turned back to the stable, the former beckoning the latter to a closer conference as soon as they were out of their employer's sight and hearing.

"And now, Jed, how has this thing come about?" asked Vann, as he returned to Diablo's stable, just as the half-breed descended from his loft.

"I was awakened by finding some one fumbling with me," explained Jed, "and had only to open my eyes to see that this intruder was Wugg. He had bound me hand and foot while I was asleep. I tried to call for help, but he grasped me by the throat, and the next moment I was gagged."

"But how did you ring the bell?"

"With my teeth, although I thought I should never, never be able to do it, as I had to untie several hard knots before I could roll across the floor, and was still longer loosening the gag sufficiently to get hold of the rope!"

"Was Wugg alone?"

"Perfectly, so far as I could see."

"You saw nothing of Comanche Jim?"

"Nothing whatever."

"But how did Wugg get into the stall?"

"Evidently with a key he had made since he has been here, for mine is still in my pocket."

"And he had no trouble about getting the steer to go with him?"

"Yes, considerable, but he finally coaxed Diablo with that tin box, which he had taken from my pocket, and of which he seemed to know the use!"

Vann stood a moment as if dazed.

He saw more and more clearly that Wugg had been engaged in this scheme ever since his advent upon the island, and it was only natural to jump to the conclusion that the hostler was merely an agent of Sam Hooper and Comanche Jim, and had been keeping them informed of all that had taken place upon the island for several months.

A glassy look appeared in the colonel's eyes. A look like that of a hunted wolf.

"Perhaps we have not been careful enough, Jed," he muttered.

"Perhaps not, colonel—although I do not see what more we could have done."

"If I go away from here, would you like to go with me?"

"Certainly, colonel. Wherever you go, I'd like to go with you!"

"You don't care in what direction?"

"Not in the least, colonel."

"Then go and take charge of the stable for the balance of the night. To be frank, I'm afraid my affairs are tumbling into confusion, and that we're booked for trouble!"

"It looks that way, colonel, I'm frank enough to say. But you've lots of ready money, and the girl will soon be here. Why not be wise in time? There are millions of square miles in the world which have never been trodden by human footsteps. Why should any man wait too long upon a precarious footing?"

"Enough, Jed! Look sharp while we do stay, and you shall go with me!"

And with this Vann turned away, thoughtful and gloomy, retracing his steps toward his dwelling.

CHAPTER XLII.

VANN AND HIS CHEROKEES.

THE colonel's gloom had deepened to a keen anxiety by the time he had reached the seclusion of his dining-room.

He realized, better than any one else, the precarious nature of his footing.

He had been guilty of crimes which would call for terrible punishment, if they should be discovered.

His thoughts dwelt particularly upon a certain detective he had summarily suppressed a few weeks before, and he could not dismiss various other misgivings.

"Yes, it's time to wake up to the facts," he muttered. "Wugg may not be the only traitor. A little of Hooper's money expended here judiciously might put me in as bad a jacket as Jed has been wearing for the last hour or two. I shall get left if I do not keep my eyes and ears open."

He stepped to his sideboard and turned a tumbler two-thirds full of brandy, which he dispatched at a swallow.

Then he looked to his revolver, and took his way to the kitchen.

Here still sat his old half-breed housekeeper, with her feet on the hearth of the stove, but she had fallen asleep.

She was at least sixty years of age, and singularly decrepit in appearance, her frame being much bent, but she had an eagle eye and good teeth, and was both active and capable.

She was Jed's aunt, and it was to Jed that her presence was owing.

Gently waking her, the colonel expressed his regrets that he had kept her up so long, and dismissed her, waiting until she had vanished.

Then he threw himself on a lounge, and gave himself up to thought.

His face continued clouded, but, nevertheless, there soon crept into it a look of jubilation that would have caused Edna Allington to shudder.

He said to himself that she could not possibly escape the web he had woven to catch her, and that she would soon be in his clutches.

As to Sam Hooper, why was it that his faithful and capable Cherokees had not yet arrived from the camp of the cowboys, with news of his death?

Had harm befallen them?

Had they been unable to accomplish what they had undertaken?

He stirred uneasily, as he glanced at a clock, noting the lateness of the hour.

Then he resumed his cogitations, and remained for a long time oblivious of all that was transpiring around him.

He was at length aroused by a knock on the outer door.

"It's only me, sir!" called a voice, which he recognized as that of Pepper.

Vann hastened to admit him.

The Cherokee's face was flushed, and he seemed unusually nervous and excited.

The neck of a bottle, which appeared above one of the pockets of the new-comer's coat, seemed to throw some light upon this change in his mien and aspect.

"Come in, Pepper," invited Vann. "I was just wondering what had become of you."

The colonel held the door open until Pepper had entered, and then closed and locked it.

"Sit down," added Vann, motioning his aid to a chair. "Where's Salt? No harm has happened to him?"

"No, sir. He's at our cottage."

He sat down heavily, as if weary with the many labors of the day and night.

"What luck?" asked Vann, abruptly. "Did you get a chance at Hooper?"

"We did, colonel. He lay down and went to sleep under our very eyes."

"And you killed him?"

"No, colonel. We thought of a better plan while waiting. We took him alive!"

"Good," cried Vann, his eyes gleaming with gratified malice. "That is indeed better than killing him—for the present!"

"But we lost him," pursued Pepper, watching keenly every look and expression that came and went upon the countenance of his employer.

"How lost him?"

"We encountered Comanche Jim just as we were leaving the camp of the cowboys," explained Pepper, "and Jim took him away from us!"

The brightness faded from Vann's face, which again became clouded.

"What a pity!" he cried. "You ought to have killed him!"

"But we waited patiently until after Comanche Jim had left camp," pursued Pepper, "and then we watched our opportunity—"

"And captured Hooper again?" interrupted Vann, with sudden eagerness and excitement.

"Yes, sir. We got hold of him a second time, and on this occasion there was no Jim to come to his rescue!"

"So that you still have him?"

The Cherokee bowed.

"And have brought him to the island?"

"Of course, colonel."

"Then where is he?"

"He's at the cottage, in Salt's keeping!"

"Strongly bound, I hope?"

Again Pepper bowed.

"But in Salt's keeping only? Is there not danger that he may escape, or that some of his friends may rescue him?"

"Oh, not at all, colonel. Salt is locked up in the cottage with him, and would put a ball through him at the first sign of any trouble!"

"But why did you take him to your cottage at all, Pepper?" demanded the colonel, with visible wonder and annoyance. "Why didn't you bring him here?"

"Well, there are several little points to be settled first, colonel," replied Pepper, as he leaned back in his chair, crossing his legs. "You may remember that you offered us a hundred apiece, and so forth, to take this man's life?"

"Oh, yes, Pepper, and I am willing to give you the same for taking him alive—a hundred dollars apiece and a barrel of whisky for each of you!"

It required all of the Cherokee's stoicism to appear calm under the mental convulsions produced by these words, but he managed it.

"Then there is another matter we'd like to say a few words about," resumed Pepper, "and that is the trouble Salt and I have taken to make the stampedes of Diablo a success. What are you going to give us in acknowledgment of our zeal in this particular field?"

"Why, I've already paid you, haven't I?" queried Vann, looking surprised and annoyed. "You've had your regular wages from month to month—twice or three times as much as any of your people are getting!"

"In a word, all any Injun deserves?" sneered Pepper, with ill-concealed wrath and scorn.

"What do you mean, Pepper? Are you dissatisfied? Have I not done well by you? What are you driving at? Do you want more money?"

"I'll answer your last question first, colonel. Salt and I want 'more money!' We want to be paid suitably for what we have done for you. In a word, we want you to settle with us to date upon a reasonable basis!"

The colonel looked as if he would have liked to answer these demands with a bullet.

But he remarked, in time to avoid acting upon any such temptation, that Pepper had his right hand in his pocket, and it occurred to him that the said hand might be closely associated with a revolver.

"How much do you and Salt want?" he asked, in a hoarse whisper.

"A mere percentage on the money we have brought into your pockets, colonel."

"Name the amount, Pepper."

"Simply five thousand dollars."

The colonel sat as if petrified.

"With the understanding, of course," added the Cherokee, with an insolent sneer, "that we're good enough 'Injuns' to buy our own whisky when and where we want it."

"And if I refuse?" queried the colonel, as he arose agitatedly.

"Salt and I will not only set Sam Hooper free within five minutes," declared Pepper, with quiet energy, as he also arose, "but we'll go with him to meet Miss Allington on the Turkey Creek Trail, and will take precious good care, Colonel Vann, that she never falls into your clutches."

The colonel recoiled till the wall stopped him. He had never been so astonished in his life.

Nevertheless, the disappearance of Wugg had prepared him for any defections that could possibly be presented.

Besides, he comprehended only too clearly that these too enterprising red-men had him at their mercy.

He must pay, or be defeated at every point.

"All right," he muttered. "Go and bring Hooper here, and I'll hand you the sum demanded."

Pepper did not move.

"I cannot go for Hooper," he said, "till I have received the money."

"What! are you afraid to trust me?" cried Vann, angrily.

"Yes, that's it," avowed Pepper. "You'd try to trick us in some way. But we are not to be tricked. We must have the money."

"Then I'll go with you," said Vann, unlocking the door. "Of course I must see that the man is really in your hands before I can hand out such a large sum of money."

"Certainly. But I can call the prisoner here with a signal," said Pepper.

He stepped out of doors, and clapped his hands together loudly three times.

"That'll bring him here," he said, returning to Vann's presence. "Of course we have not entered upon this business without making arrangements for all contingencies."

"I should think as much," ejaculated Vann as he resumed his seat. "I see you carry too many guns for me. You shall have the money."

A few moments later, Salt appeared, bearing on his shoulder Sam Hooper, who was laid on the lounge the colonel had previously occupied.

"It's all right, Salt," said Pepper. "The colonel accepts our terms, and gives us five thousand dollars in full payment for all services to this date, including the capture and delivery of this prisoner!"

"Have you got the cash?" asked Salt.

"I shall have it in a minute," answered Pepper. "The colonel has got to step to his desk to get it."

"Yes, that's it," declared Vann.

"But don't be gone too long, colonel," enjoined Pepper, significantly. "If you are, we shall not be here when you return. We have three fresh horses in waiting, and at the first sign of treachery shall take a hurried departure!"

"Oh, there's no occasion for these threats, Pepper," said Vann. "Give me time to go to my desk and count out the amount demanded, and I will bring the same to you!"

"So let it be," returned Pepper, and the colonel vanished into an interior apartment.

He was back in less than a minute, and placed a large roll of bills in Pepper's hands.

"Quite right, colonel," said Pepper, after counting the money and putting it in his pocket. "And now will you kindly excuse us till daylight? We're very tired, and must get to bed. We shall be at the cottage, if you should want us."

The colonel nodded, and the Cherokees vanished.

CHAPTER XLIII.

JUDGE CAWDER.

THE colonel and his rival were alone.

"You see, Sam, what it has cost me to get hold of you," observed Vann, as he began pacing to and fro in front of his prisoner, whom he regarded with glances of infernal malignancy. "But I should regard even twice five thousand dollars as well expended, if such a sum were necessary to bring me the triumph of this moment!"

The young cattle-dealer looked keenly at his excited and irate rival, but did not make any response to these observations.

He was conscious of being in an eminently disagreeable situation.

His hands and arms were swollen and sore, with the cords which had been drawn around them, and the same remark applies to his limbs and feet.

"I'll say more on these subjects soon," added the colonel, as he assured himself by a brief examination that Sam was helpless. "Excuse me a moment."

The villain locked the door of the kitchen, taking the key away with him, and vanished into an interior department.

No sooner had he gone than a pantry door was opened near Sam's head, and a man's head emerged into view.

"It's only me, sir—a friend," said a voice, which was accompanied by a kindly and sympathetic smile. "Keep up your spirits and courage, Mr. Hooper. I'll set you free as soon as Vann really gives me a chance."

And then the head was withdrawn.

The concealed listener was Wugg!

Not wishing to pass such a night in the open, he had come back to the island, after the escape of the steer, as related, and had concluded to "carry the war into Africa" to the extent of quartering himself in Vann's house.

Finding the old half-breed housekeeper asleep, as he looked into the kitchen, it had not been a difficult matter for him unseen to gain the pantry in which he was hiding.

"Many thanks," muttered Sam, in a guarded tone, knowing that the concealed watcher could readily hear him. "I'm not without hopes that those red-skins intend to do me a good turn, but in the mean time your assurances give me great pleasure."

"Caution!" whispered Wugg. "Vann is not far distant!"

At the end of a few minutes a sound of footsteps resounded on the walk near the kitchen door, accompanied by the snap of a "bulldozer," and soon reached the entrance.

Then a key was inserted in the lock, the door opened, and a burly figure entered.

"Judge Cawder!" cried Sam, in a voice of irrepressible amazement.

"Why, is that you, Mr. Hooper?" returned the new-comer, closing the door and advancing towards the prisoner, at the same time throwing his black-whip into a corner. "What are you doing?"

"I'm a prisoner here, judge," replied Sam, with searching glances. "But what are you doing, to show up here in such a free-and-easy

fashion? I haven't seen you since you sold me that last drove of cattle in Texas!"

"No? Then I have the advantage of you," assured Judge Cawder, as he sat down, "for we have met before this evening!"

Sam stared still more intently.

The judge was very much such a man as the colonel, but he seemed larger and more corpulent, having more frontage and broader shoulders, with a marked stoop, while the colonel was straight as an arrow.

The judge wore long hair, too, and an immense beard, both well tinged with white.

His principle article of dress was a huge drab swallow-tail coat, with shiny brass buttons, in the style of fifty years ago.

But his eyes—his manner—and various other features and characteristics—how much they reminded one of Vann!

"I think I can read your thoughts, Sam," said the judge, after a pause.

"Well, read them!"

"You're thinking that there is a very close connection between me and Vann!"

"True, judge!"

"Well, there is, Sam!"

"It has even been suggested," continued the prisoner, "that Colonel Vann and judge Cawder are one and the same person!"

"Why, how could that be?"

"Easily enough. The difference between the two men need only be a difference of clothes, beard, and so forth! I suspect the stoop in your shoulders is a mere detail of the coat and not of the person! And the same of your hair and beard!"

"Well, I'll not deny it," returned the judge, as he removed his beard and a wig, disclosing the mocking face of the colonel, and then took off the old-fashioned coat. "But I think you will agree that the game has been well played!"

"It has indeed," admitted Sam, who could not help looking surprised to find verified a suspicion which had been rather suggested to him than accepted. "Judge Cawder, then is merely another name for John Vann! As the judge, you sold me the cattle you have since been stealing as the colonel!"

"Exactly," admitted Vann, with a noisy peal of laughter.

"And such being the case," pursued Sam, considerable new light beams upon me! Perhaps you will admit that the cattle sold me had been dosed and 'doctored' beforehand, in such a way as to remember at any time the peculiar influences you were able to bring to bear upon them!"

The colonel laughed again, as he stepped to the adjoining apartment, and came back with the coat and vest he had temporarily discarded, and which he proceeded to resume.

"No, I'll not deny that fact," he declared, with increased jubilation of manner. "Every one of those steers had been 'doctored,' as you have suggested!"

"In what way?"

"Oh, I had rendered them all victims of a habit quite as bad in its way as the 'opium-habit' is for men and women!"

"And without much expense, I suppose?"

"Quite right again! The weed I use, as the principal ingredient of my 'dose,' is so common in Texas," explained the colonel, "that it is almost the only vegetation in certain districts. Without pausing upon the details—for we're coming to more important matters—permit me to say that I have given considerable attention to the tastes and habits of cattle, and especially to the art of stampeding them, and that what you have seen to-night is a sample of the perfection to which I have carried this science."

"But those more important matters?"

"I referred of course to a little game I'm just now playing," proceeded Vann, becoming more jubilant every moment. "As soon as I learned from a friend in Wichita that you were coming this way, I resolved to be the principal beneficiary of the journey. In a word, I availed myself of the telegraph in such a way as to start Miss Allington in this direction by the afternoon train yesterday and I expect her to arrive here within the next two hours!"

Sam stared at the speaker as if appalled—and indeed he was.

What possibilities of rascality suggested themselves at that moment!

He felt that he had failed to realize adequately the character and resources of his deadly enemy.

"Of course I need not go into details," added Vann, as he arose. "I will see you later—after Edna has come! In the mean time, just think how fully I have taken and am taking my revenge, not merely upon the girl herself, but upon you and your father and mother! Of course your parents are with Edna, and that was what I both desired and expected. I need only add that your betrothed will never get out of my hands alive! If I am compelled to leave these familiar scenes—as is likely—she will accompany me, and I have my eye on a snug retreat from which you will never be able to dislodge me!"

Without awaiting a response—and indeed Sam was too horrified and anguished to have

made any—the colonel turned upon his heel and hastened out into the night, leaving the door locked behind him.

CHAPTER XLIV.

LYING IN WAIT AGAIN.

ALONG a lonely trail sped three horsemen at a furious gallop—Drawback, Rawdger, and Thad Burrows.

They were on their way to execute the plans we have seen them discussing, and were still together for the simple reason that they had not yet reached the point in the road where they expected to separate to their several destinations.

Drawback took the lead, but Rawdger and Thad were as eager as their associate.

All were as sinister of mien as of purpose, and had ridden for miles with a fury corresponding to their excitement.

"At this rate we shall soon knock out our horses," at length said Rawdger, as he managed to place himself abreast of his companions.

"No matter if we do," returned Drawback, moderating his pace. "We can get others at Chedley's."

"True," said Burrows, "but the old fellow'll be abed and asleep at the moment of our arrival, and may delay us."

"Not a bit of it," declared Drawback, who had moderated his pace for no other reason than to look ahead with a sight-glass he habitually carried on his nocturnal expeditions. "I see a light ahead which can only come from Chedley's!"

"Good," commented Burrows. "We can at least count upon quenching our thirst at the Four Corners!"

The trio pressed forward, and ere long arrived at the cross-roads to which Thad had made allusion.

The inn of Ike Chedley was a log-house of two or three rooms only, and of one story, but it enjoyed considerable patronage, standing at a bifurcation which served as a connecting link between the Abilene cattle trail and the route branching through the Turkey Creek Valley.

To their surprise, the three conspirators found old Chedley seated in his shirt-sleeves on his front veranda, with a door open behind him and the light of a petroleum lamp streaming out upon him.

"Hello, Chedley," called Drawback, as he drew rein at the steps. "What can keep you up so late?"

"I'm expecting company," muttered the tavern-keeper, a little ungraciously, he gained his feet.

"And not precisely the company which has arrived, eh?" pursued Drawback, as he slipped to the ground nimbly.

"No, Mr. Drawback!"

"Well, neighbor, you needn't worry about that," assured Thad Burrows, as he also dismounted. "I reckon our cash is as good as the cash of any one else!"

"Yes—so far as it goes," admitted the tavern-keeper modifying his air, as if quite willing to be of service to the new-comers. "What will you have, gentlemen?"

"A drink or two all around—nothing else, I presume," answered Drawback, throwing his reins over a hitching-post. "But who are you expecting at this late hour, if I may be so bold?"

"I do not know the fellow's name," replied Chedley, leading the way into the house. "But he works for Colonel Vann, and he's in charge of a young lady who is going to Salt Island to marry the colonel!"

The information was simply staggering.

The conspirators exchanged glances of astonishment and delight.

Never before had they been so favored.

The reference could not possibly be to any other young lady than Edna Allington and to the emissary who had been dispatched by Vann to effect her capture.

"I'll take a drop of whisky," observed Drawback, averting his face, to conceal the wild gleam of joy upon it.

"The same for all of us," said Rawdger, who had followed the example of his associates in dismounting and entering the tavern.

The trio were duly served, and Drawback readily prevailed upon the old tavern-keeper to take a drink with the party.

"Didn't catch the young lady's name, did you, Ike?" asked Drawback, with assumed carelessness, after he had taken a swallow of whisky and expressed his approval of it.

"Oh, yes. Her name is Allington!"

The conspirators again exchanged startled and significant glances.

"But why do they come here, Ike?" asked Drawback. "The lady must have naturally taken the Turkey Creek Trail!"

"Of course," acknowledged Chedley, "but the young man expects some sort of trouble, possibly pursuit—he didn't say exactly what—and it's to be presumed that he intends to come this far out of his way to throw his pursuers off the scent. Another thing, he wanted a relay of horses, and fancied he could not do better than to get them of me."

Drawback emptied his glass in silence, but not without studying the features of Ike Chedley.

"Would you like to make a pot of money, old man?" he asked abruptly.

"How make it?"

"By rescuing that girl from the colonel's agent and restoring her to her friends!"

"Why, is she a prisoner?"

"That's just the case, Ike," assured Drawback, leaning confidentially over the counter. "If you could see your way to joining us, we could doubtless put a few hundreds into your purse before the week is ended!"

"What! are you after the girl, too?"

"We mean to rescue her and return her to her parents, that's all," explained Drawback. "It will be easy for you to play into our hands, as we'll proceed to show you."

The tavern-keeper shook his head vigorously, but with evident regret.

"There's no use of talking, gentlemen," he declared. "I cannot take any such action as you have suggested. The fact is, I am too far committed to the other side. Vann has not only paid me well for a number of jobs in which I have assisted him, but I've seen enough of the man to be afraid to take any action whatever against him!"

These declarations gave the conspirators a chill, as was readily seen by their faces.

Drawback did not fail to insist, however, and both Rawdger and Burrows joined their arguments and suggestions to those of their leader.

But all in vain.

"I tell you I should not dare interfere in any such way with the plans of Colonel Vann," was Chedley's final declaration. "You merely waste your time by talking to me further on this subject. The colonel has an army of friends and followers, as you must be aware, and he'd kill me or drive me out of the Nation in less than forty-eight hours, if I were to become a party to your projects."

Once more the conspirators exchanged glances.

"Can't we prevail upon you to change this decision?" asked Drawback.

"Never, gentlemen," assured Chedley. "There's no use of saying another word on the subject!"

"Then we shall have to do without your services, of course," said Drawback. "More than that, we shall have to suppress you for an hour or two, or until we have carried out our intentions!"

"How suppress me?"

"Why, by taking you prisoner," explained Drawback, blandly. "Sorry to be driven to such extremities, but we must gag and bind you, and stow you away in the shed or some other snug retreat, until Miss Allington has been restored to liberty."

Chedley first protested, and then resisted with all the strength and activity of which he was capable, but he would have been wiser to surrender at discretion.

Bound and helpless, he was duly stowed away in an unused shed, and left to his angry reflections, while his captors boldly took possession of the little tavern.

"Of course there's no question of our going a step further," said Drawback, as he helped himself to another drink of whisky. "We must again modify our plans to make them suit these discoveries and circumstances. We'll all remain on the watch, with a view to the girl's capture and the suppression of the colonel's agent."

"Three to one, we ought to have an easy victory," said Rawdger. "But what's to be our plan of action?"

"I will represent Chedley," replied Drawback, "and you and Thad are to keep out of sight until wanted. You are not only to conform to all I do and say, but you are to be prompt in acting upon any signal or direction I shall have occasion to give you. Take another drink, if you want it, and take possession of the room adjoining."

"Is it safe to leave Chedley out of our sight in this way?" asked Rawdger.

"You'd think so, if you were to take a good look at him. He can neither stir nor speak."

A few other dispositions were duly taken, and then the conspirators began watching impatiently for the expected arrivals.

CHAPTER XLV.

ONE AGAINST THREE.

By the time Comanche Jim and Edna had fully exchanged explanations, the former caught a glimpse of a light which glimmered through the bushes at no great distance ahead, and hastened to report the discovery to his companion.

"May it not be a tavern?" asked the girl.

"It's a little den kept by a man named Chedley, I think," replied Jim. "But why he should be stirring at such a late hour, I cannot imagine."

"Belated travelers, perhaps—like ourselves," suggested Edna, smilingly.

"Or sickness," returned Jim. "In any case, we shall soon know."

Moderating the pace of his horses, Jim ad-

vanced with the air of a man who has been too often ambuscaded to rush into peril.

"It may be," he added, "that Chedley is waiting for your captor," and he glanced at his prisoner. "In that case, he'll hardly be pleased at the turn affairs have taken."

"However that may be, there's nothing to fear from him, I suppose?" queried Edna.

"Nothing whatever," assured Jim. "I'll merely take the precaution of placing our prisoner inside the vehicle."

The transfer was soon made, at the expense of a brief halt, and then Jim resumed his seat upon the driver's box with Edna beside him.

"I'll turn up my collar and slouch my hat over my eyes," added Jim, as the carriage again rolled forward. "They say Chedley is a hard case, and it's quite possible that he has undertaken to furnish a relay of horses, or to be of some other use to the colonel and his minions."

The light which had attracted the attention of the travelers was now close at hand, shining out from an end window with an undisguised brilliancy which suggested to Jim that it had all the meaning of a signal.

A few moments more, and the carriage drew up in front of the inn, while a man came out to meet it, lighting his way with a lantern.

This man, as Jim saw at a glance, was Theopolus Drawback.

"As you see, I am waiting for you," was Drawback's greeting, as he made an ineffectual attempt to peer into Jim's face, "and the horses are harnessed and ready. If the young lady will come into the house a moment—"

"She will not give you that trouble," interrupted Jim, in a voice as much unlike his own as possible. "We've no time to lose. Fetch on your horses."

Little more was said until a pair of fresh horses had been put to the carriage, and all the others had been led to the little shed which served Chedley as a stable.

"All alone here?" then asked Jim.

Drawback answered in the affirmative.

"Where is Chedley?"

"Gone to bed, sir."

"May I ask who you are?" pursued Jim.

"My name is Jetter," answered Drawback. "I am Chedley's new man!"

Turning suddenly, Jim caught a glimpse of a couple of men who were peering from one of the windows of the inn, and whom he instantly recognized as Burrows and Rawdger!

This recognition was all that Jim needed to understand the situation.

He realized that the three plotters of the previous day were again busy.

Doubtless they had suppressed Chedley.

And doubtless, too, their desire was to get hold of Miss Allington.

A fine scheme within a scheme, as Jim readily divined!

"Did you say that you are all alone here?" he asked, turning anew to Drawback, but still keeping his own face in the shadow.

"All alone, sir—with the exception of Mr. Chedley, who's abed and asleep!"

Jim appeared to reflect upon this statement.

In good truth, he was asking himself what would be the best way out of the existing situation.

"May—may I ask who you are, sir?" queried Drawback, after a few moments of further anxious and puzzled attention.

"Oh, yes—certainly," replied Jim. "My name is Drawback—Theopolus Drawback! And these two men in the house are my very particular friends—Thad Burrows and Rawdger! See?"

Theopolus gasped for breath, as was natural.

He comprehended that his latest grand scheme was doomed to the same fate which had overtaken all the others.

A dismal groan escaped him.

"Yes, I see!" he avowed, with an air of utter disgust and terror.

"If you don't," pursued Jim, cocking a revolver, "I have something here that will quickly bring you to your senses. Tell me all, Theopolus, before I get nervous. What's your game?"

"We wanted to secure the girl, that's all, sir."

"But to what end?"

"We—we wanted to get a big ransom for her."

"A ransom? From whom?"

"From her father, or from Hooper, or even from Colonel Vann—we did not care which!" avowed the crestfallen conspirator, with the frankness of desperation.

"So far, good! Now for the truth about Chedley. Have you killed him?"

"No. Not even harmed him. We've simply taken him prisoner."

"Where is he?"

"In yonder shed!"

"Bound and gagged, of course?"

"That's all, sir!"

"Then come with me."

Jim led the way, after a few words to Edna, to the spot where Chedley was lying.

"Let him free," ordered Jim.

Theopolus hastened to comply.

"And, now, friend Chedley," said Jim, "you may turn the tables on Drawback. Bind him hand and foot and gag him!"

The tavern-keeper did not require to be told

twice, and in a few moments more Theopolus was a helpless prisoner.

"This way, Chedley," then invited Jim. "There are two other intruders in your house I'd like to see treated in the same fashion."

"You refer to Burrows and Rawdger?"

"Exactly. Will you help me capture them?"

"With the greatest of pleasure."

Thad and Rawdger were just beginning to get uneasy and to have sundry misgivings, when Chedley led the way into their presence.

We need not linger upon the arguments Jim brought to bear upon the couple.

It is enough to say that they were effective, and in another minute the two men were lying beside their associate, in the same disgust and helplessness he had experienced.

"There! I have only one word more to say to you," said Comanche Jim, with smiling scorn and contempt, "and that is said entirely in your interest, not in mine. In about an hour from now, when Chedley will set you free—after being duly paid for any damage your conduct has cost him—you will be at liberty to go home, and I would advise you to carry away from this spot a resolve to be strictly honest and peaceful to the very end of your lives. Believe me, you were not cut out for road-agents and similar gentry, and will never make a success of any scheme of violence and rascality you are capable of inventing. See the point?"

"We do, indeed!" avowed Drawback, heartily.

"Then good-by and good luck!"

And in another minute Comanche Jim and Edna had resumed their journey.

CHAPTER XLVI.

VANN'S FINAL ARRANGEMENTS.

At the moment Vann took leave of Sam Hooper as related, he saw a figure hastily approaching which he promptly made out to be the half-breed, Jed, the keeper of Diablo.

The fellow was terribly excited.

"As we were saying, colonel," he panted, "we're evidently booked for trouble!"

"How so? What have you seen?"

"A lot of cowboys and cavalymen, who are encamped at the mouth of Salt Creek, behind Point Bluff!"

The colonel looked startled.

"But you can't see through the Bluff, Jed," he declared. "You must have mistaken the movements of Diablo or some of the stampeded cattle for those of cavalymen—"

"Oh, I've been there in person," interrupted Jed, still gasping for breath, as he called attention to his clinging and dripping garments, which attested that he had just splashed through the river. "It happened this way, colonel. As soon as I got back to the stable, I resolved to search through it, from the underpinning to the roof. This search naturally included a survey of our surroundings from the cupola. At my first glance down the river from that point, I detected a camp-fire which had been kindled behind the Bluff. Wondering and suspicious, I hastened to take a turn in that direction, and in due course took a survey of the camp in question. The men are partly the cowboys of Sam Hooper, and partly soldiers from Fort Reno!"

"Soldiers?" repeated Vann, in an excited whisper, his features paling. "Sure, Jed?"

"As sure as that we're alive, colonel! Why, I recognized a lot of them—among the cowboys, Hammick and Bartle, with Crossman and Jenkins; and among the cavalymen at least half a dozen, including Sergeant Crossman!"

Vann drew his breath hard, as if oppressed profoundly by these revelations.

"I see how it is," he muttered. "Hooper has often asked the troops at Fort Reno to interfere with our stampedes, and the officer in command has at length decided to take action. This is not the first time the sergeant and his crew have been seen in this neighborhood. I wonder if the rascals have any connection with the men in my employ. Run and see if the Cherokees are at their cottage!"

The half-breed hastened to comply, but was absent less than a minute.

"Yes, they are both there, colonel," he reported, "and both are asleep."

"Then they can have no connection with the new-comers. They spoke of having three horses in readiness for flight, however."

"Yes, colonel, but they assisted me in putting them out just after they brought Sam Hooper to you."

This circumstance convinced Vann that Pepper and Salt were innocent of all dealings with the new-comers, and he hastened to act upon the information Sed had brought him.

"If those men are so near," he reflected, aloud, "it's quite possible that they intend to make a raid upon us."

"Quite, sir. Things looked that way. They seemed to be holding themselves in readiness for instant action!"

"Then go and find the stockmaster, Jed, and tell him that my orders are to get everything into shape as soon as possible for a visit from the enemy."

"Yes, sir."

"He's to drive across the river such cattle as have not been killed, or otherwise dispose of

them, and to gather and arm all his men, getting them ready for a battle with these meddlers, if they should decide to intrude upon us. In a general way he knows just what to do, and you've only to warn him. Be lively, old fellow, and then await orders at the stable."

Jed hurried away in the direction of the slaughter-house, promptly vanishing from view.

"The villains!" muttered Vann, with fierce curses. "They could not intrude at a more awkward moment, just as I am expecting the girl. But I'll soon be ready to give them the slip if necessary."

He hurried to his sleeping apartment again, traversing the kitchen, and laid hold of a handsome trunk which he kept habitually under his bed, and at sight of which his eyes brightened.

"Let what will come," he muttered. "I shall be a long distance ahead if I get away with the girl and all this money. About every dollar I've taken from Sam Hooper is still at my disposal, and it will be ample to set me up like a nabob in my new quarters."

He reflected a moment as to his course, and then shouldered the trunk and carried it to the kitchen.

"Ah! thinking of a journey, eh?" remarked Sam, with smiling sarcasm. "I fancied you were about at the end of your rope, so far as a residence on Salt Island is concerned."

"Oh, I'm simply going away upon a bridal tour," returned Vann; "and as I shall start as soon as Miss Allington makes her appearance, I thought it would be well to have my grip ready. Here's a good place to stow it away until wanted."

He opened the door of the closet in which Wugg had taken refuge, and hastily thrust the trunk into it—then closing the door, without the least suspicion of Wugg's presence.

"And now for a drink and a few moments of rest," added Vann, as he took his way to the door leading to the dining-room. "Do not fear, Sam, that you will be neglected. I will look in from time to time to see that you are safe. If you keep awake, you may be able to hear the voice of your charmer soon. By-by!"

And the outlaw again vanished.

CHAPTER XLVII.

HOW THE LIGHT DAWNED.

No sooner had the retreating footsteps of the colonel died away on his hearing than Wugg emerged from his concealment.

"The pirate!" he ejaculated, shaking his clinched hand in the direction Vann had gone. "If he don't slip up in his calculations, I shall be greatly mistaken!"

"For me perhaps," said Sam, in a tremulous voice, but for her—poor Edna!"

"Oh, he'll slip up in regard to Miss Allington, too," assured Wugg, with a cheerful breeziness of sympathy and hope that at once infected the prisoner. "Comanche Jim has been aware for hours of the scheme of this ruffian, and is even now engaged in bringing it to naught!"

"Sure?" gasped Sam.

"Yes. He told me himself how he overheard Vann chattering on this subject almost as he has chattered to you, and when Jim left me it was with the understanding that he would apply the remedy to the existing situation as speedily as possible!"

"Ah, that glorious Jim!" exclaimed Sam. "If he is indeed active in this matter, then there is still hope!"

"Don't doubt it for a moment," enjoined Wugg, as he finished cutting the cords which held Sam a prisoner. "There! you are now able to move!"

"But I'll not do so just yet," returned Sam. "A thousand thanks to you!"

He stretched his arms and legs a few moments, feeling of sundry bruises and swellings, but with an air of relief which defies description.

What joy to be again in possession of his liberty!

"You're all right?" asked Wugg.

"Oh, yes. But I'll continue to lie here for the present, just as if I were still unable to move. Vann will no doubt cast an eye upon me, as he goes and comes, but he may not notice that the cords have been cut. When he does, it will be no difficult matter for us to take him into custody."

"Are you armed?"

"No. Those red-skins took my revolver away from me."

"Then it's fortunate that I laid in an extra one before embarking on the night's adventures," said Wugg, as he produced a six-shooter from an inner pocket and handed it to Sam. "And now for a word as to our plans. Inasmuch as Miss Allington is said to be coming here, there can be no question of our departure!"

"Of course not," returned Sam. "We must remain on the watch here until the game of Vann is further or fully developed. In the mean time, tell me who you are, and how you happen to be here, and how and where you encountered Comanche Jim."

Wugg hastened to comply, but spoke in a mere whisper, and kept close to the door of the

pantry, so as to be ready to disappear at the least hint of Vann's return.

The confidences of the young men had been duly exchanged, and they had even been silent a long time, with an anxiety which was rapidly deepening to terror, when a well-known figure was seen to steal up hurriedly to one of the windows of the kitchen and peer within.

The new-comer was Bartle.

In the beams of the coming day, which had been getting brighter and brighter for half an hour preceding, it was not at all difficult for Sam to make out the face thus pressed against a pane of glass near him, although the lamp which had lighted the kitchen during the night had now burned so low as to be useless.

"It's one of my cowboys," exclaimed Sam, as he sprang forward, and tapped gently on the window, and then proceeded to raise it.

"Ah, here you are?" breathed Bartle, with indescribable relief. "Let me in!"

"The door is locked," said Sam. "You'll have to slip through the window!"

Bartle hastened to do so, and the window was closed behind him.

"Well, everything will soon be as bright as the new day," Bartle hastened to declare, as he shook hands heartily with Sam, and acknowledged an introduction to Wugg. "Jim has rescued Miss Allington and your father and mother from their perilous situation, and we may look for them here from one moment to another!"

Oh, joy-giving words!

How the tortured soul of Sam Hooper thrilled with this information!

"But why here?" he asked, after a moment of silent thanksgiving.

"Oh, I deemed it my duty to telegraph Jim that you had been chloroformed and carried off by those infernal Cherokees, and he replied that you would be brought here and that I was to get here as quickly as possible, and with as many men as possible, and that he would meet me here as soon after daylight as he could—"

"Hark!" suddenly cried Sam, catching Bartle by the arm.

The trio listened.

What wild cries of terror and alarm were those which had begun to fall upon their hearing, mingling with an awful bellowing, like that of a maddened bull?

"Great heavens!" cried Sam, leaping to his feet.

The strange cries came nearer, now blending with the clatter of hoofs and the sounds of wheels furiously driven!

Louder and louder sounded those shrieks and exclamations of terror, and louder the frenzied bellowing by which they were accompanied.

"Shoot him! Kill him!" came in stentorian tones, which were recognized as those of Comanche Jim!

Raising the window by which Bartle had entered, Sam leaped out quickly, followed by his companions.

What a sight was that which came sweeping under their gaze at that moment, in the glowing radiance of that beautiful morning!

A covered carriage, with two horses at a gallop, and Comanche Jim erect on the box, with the reins in one hand, and a revolver in the other, from which he had begun firing!

Close behind the carriage the "Demon Steer," with all the signs of frenzy, continuing those angry bellowings, and pursuing the fugitives, with head and horns poised for its deadly work, and its tail lashing its flanks in the wildest fury!

And at each window of the carriage the head of a lady, displaying such terror and excitement that we cannot even make the attempt to describe it!

Of course Wugg comprehended the terrible scene at a glance!

He had too nearly lost his life with the infuriated beast not to have the liveliest realization of everything presented to his gaze.

Coming quietly along some trail, on its way to the island, the carriage had encountered Diablo, and he had furiously charged it on the instant.

This event, as appeared later, had happened when the carriage had arrived within three miles of the ford.

What a wild flight and chase had succeeded since that moment!

At one time the steer had almost overtaken the carriage, but a ball from Comanche Jim's revolver had stunned it sufficiently to give the fugitives a momentary advantage.

But now it was within a few yards of the flying vehicle, and gaining!

"Kill him! shoot him!" repeated Jim, in thunder tones, as his gaze rested upon Jed, who had just left the stable, and upon the two Cherokees, who had emerged from their cottage, while a score of butchers came pouring out of the slaughter-house. "And be quick about it!"

While uttering these appeals, Jim did not fail to give his best attention to the horses, which were going at full gallop.

He realized that his only hope of avoiding a serious accident was to keep them in the nearly elliptical drive by which the principal buildings on the island were encircled.

By the time they could return on their circuit to the front of the house, no doubt some one would bring a ball or two to bear upon the mad pursuer.

His own rifle was inside the carriage, and had it been otherwise, he would have had no chance to use it, as all his attention was monopolized by the horses.

To his joy and relief, however, as the carriage whirled toward the house, after making the circuit of the drive, he saw Vann himself leaping out to intercept the steer.

As was learned later, Vann had been surprised by sleep in his chair, while waiting and watching, and that was why he had not come back to look after Sam.

It was not till the uproar of Jim's arrival resounded upon the colonel's hearing, that the spell of his slumbers was broken.

Hurrying out to the lawn, he drew his cord and ring from one pocket, and a cake of his "dose" from another, and prepared to show his people his control over the animal, and at the same time recover his valuable steer, with which he hoped to do great business elsewhere, if compelled to leave Salt Island.

Of course he had no suspicion of the state of frenzy into which the steer had been thrown by the ignorance of Wugg.

At the right moment, therefore, as indicated, Vann made a dash for the steer, with the intention of inserting his forefinger into the hole in the cartilage of the animal's nose, as he had done more than once before, on occasions when Diablo was heady, and so bring him under control.

To his horror he found, as he grasped the high horn with one hand and the nose with the other, that the hole in the cartilage had been torn out, and at the same moment, losing his balance by this circumstance, he fell directly in front of the animal, whose fore-knees came down upon his breast with a force that nothing human could have resisted.

A single wild yell of horror, and John Vann had passed from the midst of the living.

It was not till the steer had trodden and gored its victim out of all semblance of humanity that Jim, who had drawn rein as promptly as possible and seized his rifle, was able to send a ball through the heart of the "Demon Steer," and so close its "fateful and eventful history!"

"Forward! seize them!" resounded in tones of thunder at this moment.

The speaker was the stockmaster, who came running toward the new-comers, at the head of a score of Vann's minions.

"Seize that girl!" added the ruffian, who had resolved to constitute himself the heir of Colonel Vann in this respect as in all others. "Down with that Comanche Jim! Now is the time to get square with him for all the trouble he has cost us!"

The outlaws seemed only too willing to heed these orders and suggestions.

To begin with, they were half a dozen to one, and the work in hand seemed as safe as easy.

And then, in the second place, at least one-half of the outlaws had found occasion, at one time or another, to conceive for Comanche Jim that hatred which the honest man is naturally called upon to receive from rogues and villains.

The orders of the stockmaster were only too well obeyed, therefore, the whole band of outlaws sweeping down upon the young hero with the visible intention of making short work of him.

Jim merely smiled, however, with a few whispered injunctions to those around him to beat a retreat toward the late colonel's dwelling.

Then he stepped to the carriage and took a cake of dynamite from his valise.

To light the fuse, and then toss the terrible explosive in the direction of the stockmaster and his men, was the work of a moment.

"Take care, there," he cried, sheltering himself behind one of the large cottonwoods ornamenting the grounds, and pointing at the cake of dynamite, which lay in full view on the velvety lawn, with its fuse crackling and sputtering. "Fair warning! Look out, all! I can give you more dynamite than you can dandle!"

"Dynamite!"

The wild panic which ensued, as that word echoed from a dozen throats, will be readily imagined.

The stockmaster was first to take to his heels, and he did not pause until he had placed the slaughter-house between him and the cakes of dynamite, which Comanche Jim continued to toss in that direction, and which exploded in rapid sequence with most terrific noise and effect.

"And not in vain, it seems," cried Comanche Jim laughingly, as a mighty sound of blended shots and voices reached him from the west bank of the river. "There are the boys hastening to our rescue and protection. We're all right, you see! I fancied Sam and I had not been carrying that dynamite so long and so far for nothing! The victory is ours!"

Need we say what a gloriously happy party could have been seen upon the lawn in front of

the Vann mansion, as the golden sun looked up from its bed beyond the verdure and beauty of the Oklahoma wilderness?

Sam and his betrothed in such a warm embrace as only lovers know?

The parents of Sam, also in a close embrace, beside the young couple, and also weeping with joy?

Jim and Bartle still clasping hands?

Behind them the handy cowboys who had marched so rapidly from their camp to the rescue?

Of course all these details came in their places and need not be dwelt upon.

The trunk which Vann had packed for his flight was secured by the victors and the cash therein was duly applied to one of those noble public endowments of which the Nation affords so many examples.

We have only to add that Comanche Jim has now joined the firm, and has also met his destiny matrimonially, so that two happier couples are not to be found in the world than Jim and Sam, with their respective wives.

As to the followers of Vann, they were quickly dispersed after the death of their leader, as neither Sam nor Jim cared to hold them responsible for being the hirelings of the owner of THE DEMON STEER.

THE END.

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